



A HAND
IN THE
GAME
—
GARDNER
HUNTING



Harry J. Smith-

Presented to the Soldiers
—OF THE—
United States
—BY ONE—
CITIZENS OF ST. PAUL.



THE FLICKERING MATCH REVEALED US TO EACH OTHER

Page 249

A Hand in the Game

By
Gardner Hunting

With frontispiece by
J. N. MARCHAND



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A Hand in the Game



CHAPTER I

CERTAIN HIGH CARDS

A VICIOUSLY thrown snowball missed the target at which it was hurled by my reckless hand, and struck one that was chosen by my fate. A pair of red lips, sweet and tender and beautiful, and my cruel little missile, mischievously flung in wanton carelessness, came into conjunction like the stars in a plotted horoscope, foretelling a strange new fortune for me.

She was slender and small and dark and lovely as the loveliest red rose that ever opened its flushed petals to the day. I was a great, blundering young giant with more strength than sense, more pugnacity than judgment, more hair-brained recklessness than sober experience. It was April—yes, April with snow—and spring was in the air after one parting norther had trailed a white wake across the wide flat countryside. She was at home in the little suburban village where the train that carried me cityward had been stopped by the mere accident of a freight-spill—though I call it by a different name now. And I, who had been playing in very ordinary luck but to whom fortune had just dealt certain wonderful cards, was a mere stranger,

halted by very chance for an hour at a spot I had never seen before and might have thought I would never see again.

I aimed my snowball at nothing greater than the wooden cigar Indian that stood before the corner door of the small hotel where I had had a scanty luncheon. And she came round the corner just in time for the flying frozen sphere to deal the blow that literally broke a way for me into her life.

I have never done a thing that humiliated me more. I ran to her, where she stopped and stood, half dazed by the sudden shock, both little slim gloved hands to her face. And then I saw that she was lovely.

I was twenty-four then. It is not an age of discretion. I considered myself an experienced man of the world. I had traveled, worked, loafed, played. I had faced some luck and some need. I had tasted some bitter and some sweet. I had known comfort and seen times when the expectation of a supper was the sum of my wealth. I thought that was all experience. But I had not loved.

Chance does not do things by halves. It was neither merit nor demerit of mine that had shuffled the cards. I had come to this place because a strange turn of the wheel had brought me. And I had been stopped by an unforeseen thing. I had chanced to lunch at the hotel, and to throw the snowball. When my Uncle John Randall had died, a rich and lonely old man—my only connection

with whom during his life was the fact that good old Maggie Valentine, who had nursed me at the beginning of my life, when my mother died, had nursed him at the end of his—when Uncle John had died and had left to me, his hitherto apparently unloved and unwanted nephew, all of his considerable possessions, I had thought it sufficiently astonishing. Poor old Uncle John! I misjudged him. He said he gave me his money because I was good to Maggie Valentine. That showed a soft spot in his heart, certainly. But the reason was not convincing. I had written to Maggie for years, since I had first learned where she was, and had sent her a little money. If that was the reason for surprising favor from fortune, I recommend the method as a pleasant one. But fortune only commenced with that.

She stood quite still in the sunlight—the girl—a beautiful little figure, full of lithe grace, lovely in every line, from the slender fingers that touched the smooth shining bands of her dark hair, under the modish hat, to the slim foot that was making its narrow print in the untrodden snow. I could not choose but see that, startled as I was at what I had done. She stood still and listened while I made apology. Then she raised her face and looked at me.

“Of course you did not mean to,” she said.

“Indeed, I did not. I threw at the wooden figure and missed, and you came around the corner.”

She dried the spattered melting snow from her

face, and the trickling blood from her lips. The small handkerchief she used was criss-crossed with the red marks, and dampened with the water. I clumsily offered mine. I stood awkwardly and watched, conscious at once of the wish to give better reparation, and of the wonder I felt at her utter lack of resentment for the pain and shock I had inflicted.

"Isn't there—anything I can do?" I asked.

"No, thank you," she answered. But she took my handkerchief, too—luckily a reasonably fine one I chanced to possess.

"I feel very guilty—very eager to make some reparation—and I am as glad that I have not injured you as I am, frankly, astonished at your good nature. Most girls would have been furious. Won't you let me see how much it is cut?"

She laughed a little. "It's only bruised. But see, I am ruining your handkerchief."

She held out my handkerchief. The narrow red lines showed upon it also. I was distressed, indeed. I looked at the fine little white teeth as they showed in the first real smile she had allowed. She was rather remarkably serious for so kind and gracious a little lady. I cursed my own clumsiness and my present lack of ideas to suggest a proper reparation. Also I could not but feel the charm of her and wish that I could leave a better impression.

"Surely, you can think of something I should do to—make up," I urged.

"There's nothing to make up." She smiled again, sweetly, gently, with frank good will, and no coquettishness. There was only the slightest hint of a personal interest in me, in the one glance she cast over my great, hulking figure. Perhaps the pique to my vanity had to do with the spur I felt to compel her consideration.

"Then, if I am quite forgiven——" I paused.

"You are quite forgiven. I——" She interrupted herself abruptly and looked into my eyes with sudden quick appeal.

"I know," I answered promptly. "You have thought of something I can do."

"You could—do one thing for me—if you will," she added, with a frankness that was not inconsistent with her reserve.

"I am at your service."

She looked at me again earnestly. Her eyes were dark and deep and beautiful. Her brows were straight. Her features were fine and clean-cut. Her lips, despite the slightly swollen bruise on one, showed a firm, sweet line. The contour of her cheek and chin was lovely. Her throat was white and slender. She was young,—just out of girlhood, and she was beautiful.

"I haven't any right," she said gravely. "But I'm going to take you at your word. Curiously enough, I *am* in difficulty and I have no one at the moment to serve me."

"Then let me, please."

"I will, and thank you. It's only to take this letter to the top of the stairs across the street and deliver it. A friend was to have delivered it for me, but he did not come and it will not wait."

She held out a business-like looking letter and I took it. It was addressed in a delicate hand and bore an unfamiliar name.

"The name is on it. It's for a man named Judson Bain. His office is the first at the head of those stairs there by the hardware store and his name is on the door. It will relieve me of considerable embarrassment if you will deliver it to him."

Somewhat surprised at the request I yet did not find it a thing to cavil at. It seemed still more gracious in her to give me a small service to perform. It would make my parting from her after our rough introduction more graceful. I took the letter.

"I shall take this as a sign of full pardon," I said.

She bowed, and smiled a little as she had smiled before. She yielded me my handkerchief too, seemingly with half unconscious movement. And then she turned rather sharply away.

I raised my hat and wheeled to cross the street. I was loath to lose sight of her but I could not stand and stare. The two or three companions from the belated train, who had been with me and had witnessed my exploit, were standing in a doorway, looking smilingly on. I was conscious of

them again and of their amused looks. But I did not turn my head. Indeed, my eyes held the vision of the sweet face at which I had looked, and my mind was busy with the odd suddenness with which she had acceded to my begging to be allowed to serve her. It was curious, too, that she had acknowledged that she was—in difficulty. That had been her expression—rather a strong one.

I crossed the street. At the opposite pavement I turned to look back. I could not forbear, for curiosity alone would have compelled it. The girl was not in sight but I saw faces at the windows of shops and knew that my fellow-travelers had not been the only witnesses of the episode. I quickly regretted my backward glance and was quicker still to pursue my errand. I crossed the pavement and entered the stairway that had been indicated.

I began to have a rather poignant sense of having lost something I would gladly have kept, as the feeling came that the girl had actually gone beyond my reach. Five minutes before I had not known of her existence. After that one brief moment of surprising contact—the impression she left, the impression of her beauty and of her boylike frankness and generosity—for boylike they were—had been strong. As wonder at the odd happening began to mount, as I winced again at thought of the vicious little blow I had struck, as I saw again the scarlet thread on the smooth little chin, and then the smile on the bruised lips, I felt the sudden tug of desire

that is so prompt of birth in young blood—in April—yes, even in a snow-feathered April, which is an abnormal thing and so may possess abnormal power in its ever mysterious influences. And I wished another card from the hand of the dealer—just one more—that should make the rest worth while.

I did not know—as I mounted the narrow wooden stairs to the second floor of the two-story village building, and stood before the door bearing the name of the man she had mentioned—I did not know that the thing was already done; that already I held the full hand with which I was to play my game, that the first trick lay before me, and that the stakes were to be life itself and the prize of my dreams; I did not know that I had laid my wager on the cloth and had no choice now but to play.

CHAPTER II

A QUARREL ESPOUSED

I OPENED the door at the head of the stairs and saw a bald, heavy-set, short-necked man standing in the midst of a dingy office strewn with a strange chaos of books and papers. I stepped inside and spoke the name on the envelope. I saw the fat face of him puckered with wrath and a look so sinister in his eyes that I thought of defense in the first instant they turned on me. Then I gave the letter into his outstretched hand, saw him tear it open, read three lines and turn, livid with rage, upon me.

“And who in the fiend’s name are you?”

I did not answer him. It was too thoroughly surprising an insult.

“You have the nerve to bring me this? By the Lord Harry, I have a notion to brain you!”

I found my tongue. I was not built to take abuse. It was amazing enough, but I saw no reason in that for mild expostulation.

“Begin,” I said to him briefly.

For answer he wheeled and caught up a heavy walking-stick from the side of the big desk and his voice bellowed out a great hoarse cry.

“Scancey!” he shouted, a call to some aid or

friend. "Scancey, come here! He's sent a great cub to add insult to injury! Come here!"

He whirled again and faced me, belligerent. I was astounded, but my blood has never been slow to heat and I do not love humility. It is not the part of wisdom to strike first and seek explanation afterwards, but I have had the name of doing so, and when a man strikes me, or threatens, it is his to explain. I stood still and waited.

"Who are you?" shouted the fellow, staring at me now. "Isn't it enough that you've robbed us without coming here to threaten more? Do you think I don't understand your game?"

Still I said nothing. I heard hurrying feet in an inner office and a little chalk-faced, ferret-eyed man came to the door I had hardly had time to notice before.

"Who are you?" he cried at me, like an echo of the other. "Why are you here? What have you done?"

I turned out my hands toward the fat imbecile before me. I did not answer the second better than the first. I faced the pair of them with my fingers already itching to crack their ugly heads together, for they were ill-favored enough.

"Bain, what is it?" cried the small man in the door.

The big fellow flung the note he held upon the table behind him. "Read it yourself," he snarled. Then to me, "Get out of here."

9.

"When you explain your insulting language."

"Get out of here—do you hear?" he roared. He took a stride forward and half raised his stick.

"If you strike me with that stick, I'll throw you out of the window," I said. I was growing hugely excited and spoiling for the fight.

"Wait, Bain!" cried the other man. "Wait! Don't be hasty. What does this mean?" He had picked up the sheet that had so mysteriously infuriated his friend and read it in a glance.

"Did you bring this?" he asked of me.

I bowed. "I had the honor," I answered, with impulse to irony now that my own wrath was rising.

"Do you know what is in it?"

"I do not."

"You lie!" cried the man Bain fiercely. "I saw you in the street with the Philbric girl. I saw you coming here."

"You have good eyes," I told him.

"So you're the new ally, are you?"

"I'm the fellow who brought you that note and whom you were about to thrash. I'm waiting for you—to begin."

"Hold on, Judson. Wait!" put in the other man sharply. "What is your name?" he asked me with a twisted effort at a propitiatory grimace.

"It has no bearing on the present case."

"It has."

"Well, my name is not Philbric," I answered.

"Did you come here to pick a fight?" interrupted the man Bain.

"I am not averse to one. But you are the man who is inviting trouble."

"What do you call *that*?" He pointed back to the letter in the other's grasp.

"It seems to be a red rag to you."

He yelled a curse. On the edge of explosion, he let himself go and with the outburst he swung his stick and aimed a smashing blow at me.

I stepped out of the circle of his reach. Then I stepped in, after his savage swing and grappled with him. I whirled him and caught his wrist as he lifted his great club again. Then I seized his elbow and turned it in and under with a trick I learned at school and brought him to his knees, with his heavy cane crashing to the floor. And he squealed like a hurt puppy.

The other man raised a scream of alarm. He scrambled to get something from a drawer that I thought might be a gun. I stepped over my fallen first opponent, seized the second by his shoulders and sent him spinning against the glass doors of a bookcase by the side-wall. He crashed into them and spilled a thousand fragments jangling in wild din upon the floor. Then I stooped and picked up the weapon he would have used against me. It was a magazine pistol.

The man Bain was still on his knees with his hand clapped to the shoulder I had twisted. His eyes

were on me with malevolence burning in them like something molten. His lips were white with his passion. His coat was hunched up behind his ears till it robbed him of even the appearance of a neck and his fat body so crouched upon the rug that he looked like a great pig.

I pocketed the gun. As I did so I saw the offending sheet of note-paper also on the floor at my feet. I picked it up and glanced in sheer curiosity at its contents. If ever a man had a right to read another's letter I felt that I had earned mine. This is what it contained:

"JUDSON BAIN, City.

"*Sir*: I have only commenced, as you will soon discover. I know how to meet your attacks. I have a new ally who can make it hot for you if you attempt underhand methods. Be warned in time.

(Signed) "HAROLD PHILBRIC."

I folded the sheet carefully. It was only mystery to me. It gave me no clue as to why I had been involved except that some colossal misunderstanding had arisen. But the brief scene of violence had stirred me too deeply for me to be content to withdraw now. It was only clear that the girl I had met in the street through such an odd accident was enmeshed in strange difficulty with two such men as these to whose office she herself had sent me. I could not contemplate them and my memory of her and doubt as to which side might merit my al-

legiance. Anything I could do to embarrass this pair could hardly fail to be a blow in her cause and the prompting to it was urgent.

I stooped and handed the note again to Judson Bain in pure spirit of mischief now.

"Don't forget that I delivered this," I said. "Philbric may want to be sure."

He took the paper and held it before him. His partner was picking himself lamely from the wreck of the bookcases and nursing a cut on his hand.

"You'll pay a dear price for this, young man," he volunteered, his face a shade whiter if possible than before. But the odd gesture he used—a sweep of his hand that seemed to indicate all the havoc that had previously been wrought in the office as well as the wreck I had caused—arrested my attention.

"For this?" I repeated, mimicking his movement. "How so?"

"You are clearly involved."

"I seem to be involved, but I did not start this fight."

"It's not going to be hard to prove who robbed this office last night, and why."

"And am I involved in that also? It may prove interesting to learn the extent to which I have stepped into your affairs."

"You'll learn quickly enough."

"Let us hope so. But if you can learn anything on your own part, you'd better take a lesson from

this first experience. I won't be so gentle next time."

It was pure bravado this, of course. But I loved to bait them then. I was utterly in the dark still and the fault was not mine. Besides, the idea that I was harassing an enemy of the girl I had seen, however strange it might be that she should possess such enemy, was beginning to be a joy to me. I bethought me that I could further espouse her cause if I chose by making much of this quarrel, and the impulse became paramount. I stood still by the door and drew out my pocketbook. Taking from it a card I wrote the name of the small hotel across the way upon it and laid it on a table by the door.

"That will be my address for twenty-four hours," I promised, at a hazard. "I shall spend my time making it hot for you for the sort of thing you've handed to me here this afternoon. Good-day."

I went out and down the stairs. I was so tremendously, delightfully excited now, that I could scarcely show a calm exterior as I stepped into the street. Immediately, however, I forgot the effort, for excitement was everywhere abroad. People were gathering in a crowd. Everywhere there were running figures coming toward the corner where I stood. At the very bottom of the stairway a half dozen men were gathered with every evidence of interest in the doorway from which I came and in the office above. I stepped almost into their midst and they turned upon me as one.

"Where did you come from?" some one asked.

The question seemed ludicrous enough to me. It is only a step from the tragic to the comic and I had been keyed almost to the former pitch a moment before. I laughed outright. They stared at me as if fairly aghast at my appearance.

"I have just visited Judson Bain and Mr. Scancey," I answered.

"Scancey!" The exclamation was from three or four at once.

"Certainly," said I. "Have you such a thing as a policeman or a town officer here?"

The crowd was pressing in. The people had eyes for no one but me and they seemed possessed by some tremendous interest far beyond any curiosity that could have been roused by possible noise overheard from our brief fight above.

"Is Scancey up there?" asked a short, heavy-set fellow with rather good brown eyes who pushed a little forward.

"A man whom Bain calls Scancey is up there," I replied. "He tried to pot me with this gun a moment ago."

I drew the magazine pistol from my pocket.

"Shot you?" exclaimed the chorus.

"Well, hardly," said I. "He meant to."

"Wheeler Scancey?" queried the stocky man with odd insistence.

"I don't know the man myself," I answered.

"He is a little chalk-faced chap who is too slow with a gun to afford to make the play."

The questioner turned to the others. "Then it isn't true!" he said. "If Scancey is here, he isn't at The Hazels."

"That sounds reasonable," said I. "But where's your constable?"

"I'm town marshal," he answered, turning back to me.

"Then take this gun and my complaint against this Scancey and this Bain. I went to their office on a peaceable errand—for Miss Philbric, and they tried pretty well to kill me."

"Philbric!"

Again they echoed the name I spoke.

"Are you a friend of the Philbrics?" cried a tall fellow, who was not in the front rank. He was a handsome well-dressed young chap of a different class from the rougher men about me.

"I think I may fairly consider myself so," I said.

He pushed forward. "What do you know of this shooting?" he asked. "Have you come from the house? Did you see Donna here a few minutes ago? Are you the one who took her note?"

I stared at him. "Shooting?" I repeated. "There was no shooting. I took the gun away from the little fool."

He stared at me in turn, as much puzzled by what I answered as I at his questions.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Dan Randall. I am the nephew of the late John Randall, who if I mistake not was known hereabouts."

My uncle had been one of the rich men of his state. It was a safe guess that the people of his city and suburbs were acquainted with his name and fame though I knew them not and they knew not me.

"You are Dan Randall?"

I bowed. "And you?"

But he did not answer the question. He put another instead, while the crowding people and the self-styled officer of the law hung upon his words and mine.

"Were you at The Hazels when this shooting occurred?" he almost demanded of me.

It seemed time for plain speaking. If shooting there had been—and he appeared to insist upon it—there was another mystery forming here that needed no half-answers to befog it further.

"I have not been to The Hazels," I said as explicitly as I could, "and I know of no shooting."

A general exclamation went up. I gazed around the wide-eyed circle for explanation, but they looked back at me in what seemed sheer stupid daze. But the young chap who had usurped the place of questioner came closer and put his hand on my arm.

"This is a strange mix-up," he said. "I don't understand and I don't believe you do. Did you know that Hal Philbric killed a man at The Hazels an hour—half an hour—ago?"

"No," said I simply. I had no thought to say more, for my mind leaped to the girl I had seen. Clearly this name Philbric was hers. Who the man Harold or Hal might be, whether father or brother, it was only possible to guess; but he was undoubtedly close to her. That something tragic had happened and that it concerned her nearly was too evident now to doubt. But as I remembered her sweet face, despite the cloud of trouble I thought I had detected upon it, I could read in it no sign of knowledge of tragedy.

But the man before me pressed his queries. "Didn't you talk with Donna ten minutes ago? They told me you were in the street with her."

"I was," I answered, piecing my information swiftly together. "It was on her errand I came over here."

"Then she did not know?"

"I don't believe it possible she could have known anything so tragic," said I.

He looked searchingly in my eyes. He had a fine eye of his own and a good keen look in it. He was dark, well set-up, well-groomed—a shade too well-groomed was the impression I remembered of him afterwards—but a gentleman.

"Better come with me," he said abruptly. "I have my car at the corner. We'll go out at once—when you've attended to your hurt."

"My hurt?"

"Yes. Your face is cut—rather severely I

should think. Shall we go to the drug store here and have it patched up? It should be done before we go, though we'll take as little time as possible."

I put my hand up to my cheek and felt it wet. I looked at my fingers and saw on them new stains of red.

CHAPTER III

UNKNOWN GROUND

CHANCE never does things by halves. I was convinced that morning as I sat beside Bob King in his motor while we dashed away together down a spattery country road without regard to water, mud, or speed laws. I had sent a wire to the city to catch the baggage I had left in my train and had taken him at his word. He introduced himself. He was a friend, he said, of the Philbric family. He vouchsafed no more than that, and there was no reason why he should. I had told him practically as much—and as little—on my own part. But we had small wish to speak of personalities just then. Each took the other at his word and on the evidence that eyes could collect and we talked of the uppermost thing in our minds.

“I have little enough information,” he said. “The message came to me over the phone. But nobody else knows more. It’s been a strange series of events—and now it’s come to tragedy.”

“Tell me all you’ve heard,” I said guardedly. I had no wish to make confession to him that an hour earlier I had been the veriest stranger and outsider.

I was taking enough upon myself in venturing to accompany him at his invitation to the home of the Philbrics for which we were bound, but I had chosen between this and tamely, uselessly remaining behind. If you ask excuse or motive I cannot give you better ones than that I felt I had found a plausible reason for offering my help in the quarrel in which I had already been involved and the conviction that the shooting at the Philbric country-seat had directly to do with the case in which my afternoon's fracas was now an incident. I had not long to wait to learn the accuracy of that conjecture.

"Who is the man who was shot?" I asked.

"That's the queer part," said King, with scowling brows. "I heard first that it was Wheeler Scancey. That was the impression that was general in town. But you say you saw him."

"I have an impression that I did," said I grimly.

"Then the only thing I can think of to explain it is that Hal's telephone message must have been misunderstood. Something was certainly said about Scancey."

"Did you know," asked I, "that the office of Bain was robbed last night?"

"Oh yes," said he. "It was the talk of the town till this other news came."

"Is there any connection between the two?"

He turned for an instant from his steadfast gaze at the road ahead to look at me. "Connection?" he repeated.

"Yes," said I.

"I don't know," he answered slowly. "Did anything lead you to suppose so?"

"Only coincidence. Philbric's note infuriated Bain. I took the liberty of reading it after they tried to beat me up and shoot me for bringing it."

"What was in it?" he asked eagerly. "I can't imagine why that boy Hal should write to Bain. I was to have taken the note for Donna, I suppose you know?"

He ended with the revealing question. The girl had told me that I was a substitute messenger.

"Did you expect a fight?" I asked, smiling.

"Not at all. I thought it was an errand of peace-making. Heaven knows there's been trouble enough. But I meant to find out for Donna what Hal intended before I took the note up to Bain. I missed her, however—and she gave the note to you."

There was a sound that suggested pique in his voice as he spoke the last sentence. I watched his face. It was good, clean-cut, square-jawed—the countenance of a man. I liked him, though I had already scented here what I soon learned to be the truth—a truth that is not far to seek and that stirred a strange thing in my heart from that moment as I thought of the loveliness of Donna Philbric. But the expression on his face that went with the words was fleeting and was gone in a moment.

"The note was a warning to Bain which seemed to refer to some new method Philbric had found of fighting him—a new ally, it said. Bain took me for the new ally."

"Are you?" asked King abruptly.

"I'm an ally," I answered promptly.

"And Scancey tried to shoot, did he?" he asked next moment.

"I suppose he thought it was self-defense—or defense of Bain. But the note made them wild with rage at me. They talked to me of the robbery of their office as if they fairly thought I was guilty, with the implication that Philbric had to do with it."

The car was scudding at a stiff pace between fields where the tender new green of spring growths was pushing through the light snow that had fallen upon them. It was pretty country. It was going to be beautiful when the young buds on tree and bush should burst into leaf. It seemed a land of peace, certainly, in the quiet of the balmy spring day, with the sun now warm and bright turning the snow into water. The impression of strange contrast was strong as I looked off across the shining fields and thought of the amazing errand on which I was now engaged, while I felt the stiff surgeon's plaster across my cheek-bone at the edge of my hair. I had been close to injury, it appeared, and had come away quite unconscious of the fact; and now I was whirling off through a delightful countryside toward ex-

perience of which I could make not the least reasonable forecast except from the dismaying nature of the news my companion had told.

King, however, was not content with quiet waiting. "If they connected Hal with such a thing as that office robbery they've lost something that would be valuable to him. That seems a reasonable deduction, doesn't it?"

"It does."

"If that thing would be valuable enough to Hal so that it suggests itself as an object that would tempt him to—rifle their files, say—it must and can have to do only with Bain's senatorial aspirations and Hal's fight against him."

I did not answer. This was unknown ground. But he went on without noting my silence or merely interpreting it as assent.

"Of course Hal is miles above such methods. But somebody has robbed Bain—unless this is a scheme of his to get public sympathy. I believe he is capable of any deception, don't you?"

"I should hardly be surprised at anything he might do," said I.

"But suppose he has been robbed, what can be the connection with this astounding thing at The Hazels?"

A flash of suggestion from the matters he had revealed came to me. "If a thing of value to Hal in his war on Bain has been lost," I said slowly, "it is not impossible that somebody else may have taken

it from Bain for Philbric's benefit." My mind instantly leaped speculatively forward. "It is conceivable that, in such a case—the case that some fellow had stolen something from Bain and offered it to Philbric—there might have arisen a quarrel that would lead to a shooting."

King guided the humming machine round a corner at a rate that made me suddenly cling to preserve my balance and sent us skidding fairly out upon the snowy grass with a splashing of slush from our wheels that sounded like a burst of escaping steam.

"Yes," he said briefly, "that's what has happened."

"That's what certainly may have happened," I amended. "I think it is not at all impossible that there is a case of blackmail here."

"It sounds like it—attempted blackmail. I only hope——" He stopped.

"You hope the shooting was in self-defense."

"Yes—not in the heat of overwrought indignation. In Hal's condition he might—well, he might be rash if he were much stirred. Poor boy, I knew this thing would be his undoing if he didn't give it up. Of course his work has been simply amazingly clever for so young a man, and, naturally, after the enormous stir he made at first it was hard for his friends to spare him. But it's costing dear now. No man with nerves in the shape his are, has any right to carry on such a fight."

I was silent again. Here was more unknown fact hinted at. Was Philbric a sick man?

"The first question is," continued King, "who is the man who is shot? On that will depend Hal's position." He paused a moment, then turned to me again. "Frankly, Mr. Randall," he added, "I am in distress with the fear of what's going to happen."

"Distressed?"

"Yes. Suppose they should be able to bring a charge of murder against Hal Philbric?"

"You are anticipating."

"I know."

"Suppose it is self-defense?"

"Pray God it may be. But even so——"

"What?"

"It will be a terrible burden on that poor boy's mind. You know how little he can endure now."

"I suppose," said I, quite in the dark, "that the killing of a man is a wretched thing to have in your memory even if you are innocent. Perhaps," I hesitated, "perhaps our defense of Philbric may consist largely of protection against himself."

This was a hazard, too, and I watched for its effect. But my companion seemed to take me without suspicion to be all that he himself was, a loyal friend of these Philbrics. I liked him the more for that—not unnaturally.

"I suppose poor old Aunt Charlotte will be in a

pitiable state," he said after a moment more. "And poor Donna!" he added expressively.

"Did she come directly home?" I asked, feeling for my ground.

"I suppose so. I thought we might overtake her. But she drives like the wind when she wants to hurry and I can imagine her hurry after that news reached her."

We had run something like a mile since we left the village. We were coming to the outskirts of a wooded country that was visible from the town and through which my train had come that morning. As I looked forward into the vista which the road ahead entered, the sense of astonishment at the thing that was happening to me came once again strong as a physical sensation. But its effect was stimulating, exhilarating. A battle worth while might be ahead and it would be hard indeed if I couldn't be given a share in it. Knight-errant I was, to be sure—adventuring soldier of fortune might seem the complexion of my rôle to this girl and her unfortunate brother; but I meant to make their cause mine. I would not be denied.

At another turn of the road a fine white country house, set high up and well back among the trees, appeared for an instant on the left not far away. In a moment we were running along by the side of fences high and strong that bounded a wooded park-like domain, suggesting only the private place. I reached the natural conclusion that it was our

destination just before my companion cut down his speed and turned in under high iron gates upon a private drive and we sped up a wide sweep with the sputtering snap of gravel under our tires.

It was but a moment then before we came out through the screen of trees and swept up to a good old-fashioned covered *porte cochère* at the end of a beautiful wide veranda where the April sun was shining with dazzling brilliancy on boards and paths alike.

There was little evidence of disturbance about the place. Before King had stopped his engine two servants were in the porch, one a gray-haired, smooth-faced butler who was instantly recognizable as the type of old family retainer, now major-domo of the establishment; the other a younger man who took charge of the car at once with a familiar word of direction from its owner and started it off down the drive for a garage visible through the trees at the other end of a wide lawn.

"How's Hal, John?" asked King of the older servant.

"He's a good deal wrought up, sir," replied the man simply, without undue solemnity.

"Who's the fellow that—that's shot?"

"Clarence Salver, sir," answered the servant promptly.

"Punk Salver!" King's exclamation was sharp.

"The little devil!"

Old John bowed. "He was that, sir."

"What brought him here, John?"

"He came to try to get money, sir," said the old man, the first real sign of trouble showing in his well-controlled visage.

"And he attacked Hal?"

"I—I don't know that I can detail it exact, sir."

King paused in the porch. "Wait," he said. "Tell us all about it, John, before we go in. Is Donna here?"

"Oh yes, sir. She came quite a few minutes ago."

"When was the shooting—and where?"

"In the library—at ten o'clock, sir."

"Ten o'clock!"

"Yes, sir. Master Hal wouldn't let any one know except the doctor and us in the house, sir, till the coroner and reporters came."

"Reporters?"

"Yes, sir. They've been and gone."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed King, and my sympathy went out to him as a vision of headlines and family portraits flashed before my mind's eye. But he wasted no time over it.

"What did the coroner say?"

"Self-defense—so far, sir."

"And Hal?"

"Is here."

"Donna with him?"

"Yes, sir—and the doctor."

"Is he ill?"

"He's pretty well used up, sir."

"Did he—collapse?"

"Not exactly. He—cried, sir—like a child."

"Hysteria."

"I suppose so, sir. He's bad off with those nerves of his, sir. It's a terrible pity this had to happen."

"It is indeed. Now what happened, John?"

"It was about half-past nine, sir. I had just come in from sending Miss Donna off in her car to town. She had an errand to do and was in a hurry, so she went alone. She had not been gone more than three minutes I'm sure, sir, when that little—excuse me, sir—that Clarence Salver, he came."

The old man had cast a glance or two at me, half curious. Now, he paused and looked at me and then at King. King's brows went up in some surprise.

"Why, you know Mr. Randall, don't you, John?" he said. "Randall's one of Hal's friends. Go ahead."

The servant seemed satisfied. "Well, sir," he continued. "Salver—you know he was a good-for-nothing little loafer, sir—God forgive me for saying it, now he's dead." He stopped, his face paling slowly. "My God, sir," he whispered, "he's dead! And Hal—Master Hal killed him! Does it seem possible?"

He put his old hand rather tremblingly against

the brick of the house wall and wet his lips with his tongue. Then he went on.

"He was no good—that fellow," he said.

"He wasn't called Punk for nothing, John," said King, putting his own hand kindly on the old man's arm.

"He was not. Punk he was—rotten to the heart. Well, Punk Salver came to the front door here, sir, at about 9:30, and asked me to let him see Master Hal. I wouldn't at first, for I was pretty sure he wanted money. But he kept insisting that he had news about this senatorial fight, sir—about Judson Bain, that he must tell to Mr. Philbric. So finally I let Master Hal know. I didn't half like it, for the boy hasn't felt any too well lately. But Master Hal insisted on seeing him as soon as he heard that message."

The old man paused again. He crossed the porch and seated himself upon the rail, taking hold of the upright pillar as if to steady a feeling of weakness.

"I beg pardon, Mr. King—and Mr. Randall, sir. I can't help it. I'm near to sick myself with this thing."

"Want to come in, John, and finish in there?"

"No, thank you, sir. I better tell it out here. Master Hal let him come into the library, sir, and either he or Punk Salver shut the door. That seemed queer to me. I—I went and listened at the door a little at first, sir, to hear what I could—for fear something might be wrong. But I heard Mas-

ter Hal laugh and took it to be all right. So I went about my work. And it was all of half an hour after—it was ten o'clock, sir, when all at once we heard somebody call—wild like—through the house, sir, and I ran in from the side lawn where I was just then telling the gardener about Miss Donna's roses. I was as far from the library as I could get and still hear, I guess. And then while I was coming up through the hall, hearing another shout and the noise of scuffling or something, I suddenly heard the sound of a shot."

The old man was panting with excitement now, and stopped to recover his quiet.

"Take your time, John," said King.

I looked at him as he spoke and I saw his own strong jaw hard set.

"Yes, sir," said the servant. "I'm foolish, sir, but I can't seem to help it. I was scared for Master Hal, sir."

"Of course you were."

"And I hurried so, sir, that I slipped like an old fool on one of the rugs in the hall. You know how easy it is to fall when one of those rugs goes out from under you on a waxed floor, sir? And before I was up there was another shot and a screech! Lord, sir, it makes me sick to remember it! And next minute when I reached the library door I found it open and saw Master Hal coming towards it with a pistol in his hand. And oh, his eyes just blazed, Mr. King!"

"Yes," said King. "And then?"

"And then I saw Punk Salver lying on the floor all crumpled up, sir. He was right on the rug before the fire. His knees were sort of doubled up under him and his face flat on the hearth and his hands were stretched out and one of them turned up—I shall never forget it, sir."

"What did Hal say?" pursued King.

"He said, 'John, I've shot Punk Salver. He tried to kill me.'"

"Said Punk tried to kill him?"

"Yes, sir. He said later on that Punk tried first to shoot him and afterwards to brain him with that bronze smoking-tray, sir—that long one with the heavy figures on it that Master Hal used on the library table, sir."

"I know," said King.

"It was on the floor beside Punk, sir, when I went in."

King looked at me. "It's not such a bad case, is it?" he said.

"I don't know," I answered. "It wouldn't seem so. But there were no witnesses."

"I'll take Hal's word for anything."

"Of course. So would I—but will a jury?"

"It won't come to a jury."

"Oh yes, it will—a coroner's jury."

"Did Hal send for the coroner, John?" asked King.

"No, sir. He sent me for Dr. Graham, sir, and

then the doctor telephoned for the coroner. The reporters—they came with the coroner.”

“I see,” said King. “Did Hal talk to the reporters?”

“Yes, sir—told them the whole thing.”

King nodded. “Well then, what did Punk want of Hal?”

“I don’t rightly understand that, sir,” said old John. “It was something about some letters—some letters he stole from Judson Bain’s office.”

“Stole! Who stole?”

“Punk Salver, sir.”

King and I exchanged glances of new comprehension. There was connection indeed between the robbery of Bain’s office, which was no fiction, and what had occurred at The Hazels. But as we paused while our minds followed out the clue there was the sound of another step on the porch and I looked up to see once more the girl I had first seen that morning and into whose life I had taken so strange a step.

CHAPTER IV

A FIGHT FOR ITS OWN SAKE

SHE came towards us, a slender, sweet, beautiful little vision of perfection in all that makes a girl lovely at the threshold of womanhood. She was somewhat pale, as was most natural, but she was self-possessed and calm. She was certainly not terrorized by what had occurred as many girls would have been, though she could hardly be less than deeply affected.

Hers was a frank welcome to us. She looked first at King.

"Oh, Bob," she said, "I'm so glad you've come!"

She put out her hand to him. Then she glanced at me, her dark eyes coming to mine with a sweet courage and faith in them that would have won my allegiance then had it not been already hers.

"I brought Mr. Randall out with me," said King fortuitously. "They had a fight in Bain's office and he was hurt. It seems Bain's office was robbed last night, Donna. That agrees with the story John has just been telling us."

The girl's eyes had showed a little surprise at sight of me, but she put out her hand immediately to me as King spoke.

"You were hurt?" she inquired with kindness and perfect self-command.

"Nothing worth mentioning," answered I. It was not so easy to think what my excuse for coming here had been as I looked in her face and realized the distress that must now be hers. "I thought it might have some bearing on the case," I said. "When we heard what had happened here we thought we'd better get all the facts together."

King nodded. I held the girl's small hand, ungloved now, in mine for an instant. In that instant the desire to earn the right to regard from her—to serve her and stand by her and protect her and hers rose overmasteringly in me. Strange emotion, say you, for a man who looks for the second time only on a fair face? I do not analyze it.

"You are very kind," she said, "as you were this morning."

She smiled a little. The bruise on her tender lip was only faintly visible where my snowball had struck its nasty little blow. I regarded it with strangely mixed feelings now. It was the very basis of my flimsy right to be here.

"John," said the girl to the old servant, "go and have Mrs. Griggs give you some luncheon. She tells me you have not eaten since early breakfast."

"Thank you, miss," he said and turned away from us willing to rest.

The girl led us into the wide hall of the great house. "Hal is in the library," she said. "We can

see him presently. The sooner we talk this all over the better for him I am sure. There's one very strange feature of it that will need all our minds I think."

"What?" asked King.

"Hal will tell you," she answered. "I'd rather you heard the whole story from him. I may not tell it right."

King was preceding us down the hall with the ease of familiarity and with eagerness to learn the rest. The girl paused to close the great front door and I waited. As King went in at a door on the right I turned to her sharply.

"Miss Philbric," I said on the impulse to be wholly frank with her, "please forgive this intrusion. When I heard, I could not stay away. I am an utter stranger without a right to a place among your aids, but please do not refuse me that place. It's been a mere chance that my way has crossed yours at the time of your trouble, but it would be a pity if I should merely pass on without being of use. I have already a reason for enmity against your enemy and your brother's. Let me be your ally—in any humble capacity."

She looked at me earnestly, a strangely long look that could hardly be called scrutiny but that was an examining gaze, too. She did not smile. Her face had a pitifully pained look upon it. But I had no cause for disappointment at the expression in her eyes.

"You are a brave and kind and generous gentleman," she said. "You've been involved in trouble already for us—more serious than you have told me. I had no idea I was sending you to that. But I would be unkind, indeed, abruptly to refuse such an offer as yours, though why should you take up cudgels for us?"

"Because I want to make amends for my offense this morning. Because having met your enemy I have my own grudge to nurse. Because I have already learned things that may be of use to you. And because I love the fight for its own sake with such companions in the fray."

She still looked into my eyes. "I like your honest reasons," she said. "Come and meet my brother. He will be glad to know you."

"I came with Mr. King in a manner under false pretenses," I said. "He thinks I am an old friend of the family because I let him persevere in that error. With that clear to you I am ready to take whatever place you give me."

She smiled. Something in word or tone appealed to her and there was more of frank freedom in her look. "Your name is Randall, Bob said?"

"Yes," said I. "I am the Daniel Randall who is the sole surviving relative of John Randall, who lived in your city here and whom you must have known."

I stopped. Her eyes had widened again with

sudden surprise. "You are—Dan Randall?" she asked.

They were almost identically the words King had used. I wondered, but I confessed to the impeachment while I thrilled at the sound of my name upon her lips.

"Then," she said, "you are welcome."

I suppose I looked my surprise.

"Don't you know why?" she asked quickly. Then suddenly she laughed—a little short involuntary laugh, despite the gloom that overhung her home, and in it I saw or heard something that sent again the thrill of satisfaction through me.

"You knew my uncle," I hazarded.

"I never saw him," she said.

That was the limit of my guesses. My life had never touched hers—of that I was sure—till this accidental meeting of the morning.

"I shall not tell you why now," she said. "But I am glad you have come. It is all right that Bob should think us old friends. Indeed, he knows it now. We are."

It was too welcome a thing to balk at because it was not clear. I took what she offered.

"I can play the part till I learn the secret," I ventured. "I may as well confess I don't know it now."

"Of course you don't," she said. "I should find you out immediately if you pretended. But——"

she hesitated an instant, then flashed a look of curious interest at me. "Isn't it strange?"

"It is indeed," I answered.

She sobered almost instantly as thought of the immediate present came back. But she did not show sign of lack of courage as we walked down the hall together.

"Come," she said, "there is plenty of need for all the heads we can have on one mysterious feature of this thing. If you can help us to solve that, Mr. Randall, you will help indeed."

I followed her. We turned into a bright beautiful room—the same to which King had appeared to precede us. It was a long library room on the west side of the house and the afternoon sun was gilding everything through the wide windows at the end. In the center was a huge table of heavy mahogany loaded with books and magazines. At the left was a fire on a capacious hearth glowing cheerfully despite the mildness of the day. Great easy leather chairs were placed here and there about in luxurious abundance of comfort. Handsome rugs were on the floor, vases, statuettes, a hundred and one attractive nicknacks were on tables and shelves. In the further corner at the right one of the windows came to the floor and evidently led to the porch. It was open.

Before the fire in a chair that faced it sat an exceedingly handsome and very delicate-looking young man. As I looked at him I fairly started with

amazement at the extraordinary likeness to the girl at my side. No introduction would have been necessary to proclaim the relationship between the two. The resemblance was fairly startling. It was one of those remarkable family likenesses in which one face seems practically the counterpart of the other, often seen in twins, not infrequently between two brothers or two sisters of different ages. More rarely is it found between brother and sister a year or two apart. But I have never seen a resemblance so complete, for, as the boy sat half buried in the depths of his chair, his masculine dress less pronouncedly in evidence than if he had been erect, it was instantly the one thing that impressed me.

But the girl did not note my start and my sudden comparison of the two faces. She went forward quickly to her brother.

"Hal," she asked, "where's Bob?"

The boy looked up. There was a sharp start in his movement and a crease of pain between his eyes for an instant that told plainly enough at a glance of the raw nerves I had been hearing about.

"Bob? Oh yes," he returned, after a glance at us. "He's gone into the porch with the doctor to make him tell how bad off I am."

He shivered slightly as he spoke. Then his hand went out half fumblingly to the table and commenced turning over and over, rapidly, the ivory paper-cutter that lay there. He glanced again at me uneasily.

"This is some one whom we had not expected to meet to-day, Hal," said the girl, alluding in puzzling phrase to me. "This gentleman is Mr. Dan Randall."

She stopped short. She was smiling a little and waiting for some effect she expected my name to create. The boy sat up. Then slowly he rose from his chair, his eyes fastened on my face.

"Dan Randall?" he said. He came forward putting out his hand, his face relaxing into a smile almost as sweet as the girl's. "You are Dan Randall?" he asked.

I took his hand. Poor chap, it was like a girl's in its slenderness. But the grasp of it was firm and hearty.

"I am Dan Randall," I answered him, more puzzled than before but with a leap of the heart less hard to understand as I began to comprehend that some strange unknown thing had preceded me here to give me a footing in this house.

The boy suddenly turned to her and laughed in such contrast to his distraught manner when I first saw him that I could hardly credit it. "Dan Randall!" he repeated. Then quickly he gave my hand a renewed pressure. "Pardon me, Mr. Randall," he said, "but I suppose you may know—you do know, don't you?"

He paused. His sister came and stood beside him. Her eyes were serious, but they regarded me with queer question in them.

"He doesn't know, Hal," she said.

"Won't you solve the mystery for me?" I asked. "I'm glad of anything that gives me a right to be here at this moment, but I'd be glad to know what it is."

The boy turned to his sister. His laugh had sobered. He smiled still, but his eyes questioned her. "Sis?" he queried.

And then I saw a strange thing. Slowly the color rose in the beautiful face of the girl. It climbed and spread, a lovely flush upon her fair skin, and from chin to brow her whole countenance became suffused. It was the most beautiful thing I have ever looked upon, yet my heart went out to her in pity for the embarrassment that was evident. Still she looked at me bravely.

"It must remain a mystery," she said with an effort at lightness.

"It shall," said Philbric suddenly. He saw the distress signal in her face and responded. "Randall," he said, "you come oddly introduced to us. Perhaps we'll tell you sometime. But you come at a—a most troublous moment."

"Then let me stay and help. I've learned by sheer accident about it all. Old friends have rights, you know."

"It's a poor right to claim just now," said the young man, returning to his chair and motioning me to another. "But Heaven knows I seem to be in need of my friends at this moment."

His face lost all of its lighter expression. I saw the white line spread along the edge of his lips and the blue pallor under his eyes. His hand trembled, too, as he stretched it again to the table and began once more to turn the paper-cutter.

"Mr. Randall knows all about what has happened, Hal," said the girl standing beside him, "except what Clarence Salver came here for."

The boy's eyes turned to me, but as he was about to speak King and another man, a short, stout, gray old fellow, evidently the doctor, came in from the porch. Philbric stopped as he heard their steps and turned. King started to close the window.

"There is still a chill in the air if you don't move about," he said lightly.

He fumbled with the catch on the window and seemed to have some difficulty with it.

"This is a new sort of fastener, isn't it, Hal?" he asked. "I never noticed it before."

Philbric coughed sharply and I saw him shiver again. "If Punk Salver had known how to work it this morning he never would have been—hurt," he said with a painful hesitation before his final word.

"Did he try to get out, Hal?" asked King.

"He certainly did. I'm confoundedly certain about some of the details of this thing," answered the boy, "and uncertain about others," he added. He rested his head on one hand, but the other continued the rapid turning of the paper-knife.

"Better tell us all about it now, hadn't you, old man?" said King, coming and sitting near Philbric and giving the fire a poke.

"Yes," said the boy, "of course. Sit down, sis."

His sister passed him and came toward me. As she did so she laid her hand on his busy fussing fingers on the table and stilled them. He drew his hand away sharply, then looked up at her and smiled pitifully; and I looked at the fire that neither of them might know I had seen the incident.

"Punk brought me some letters, Bob," said Philbric. "He stole them last night from Judson Bain's office." He turned to me. "King tells me you found trouble at Bain's office this morning," he added.

"This afternoon," I corrected, smiling at him with intent to hearten him. I saw a faint gleam of response in his eyes. "They were robbed all right."

The boy's fist clenched and he uttered a sharp exclamation to my complete amaze.

"My God, Doctor! Doesn't that prove my story?"

I looked at the physician for an explanation. He was standing behind King. He nodded slightly, then looked across at me. But Hal went on at once.

"I'll give you the whole of it as it happened though," he said. "Punk came and brought those letters. Now, Randall, you may not understand, but Bain is a candidate for the Senate from this district. He is a crook. Martin Fenelon, a man who

is clean and upright and decent and who was a dear friend of my father up to the very day of father's death, is also a candidate. Bain has been doing crooked things ever since the campaign began and I've been writing to the papers attacking him because I know a lot about his record that he doesn't like to have aired."

He paused and his hand went out restlessly for the paper-cutter again. Donna glanced at him with distress clouding her sweet brows, and he saw and arrested the movement. Then he continued:

"Punk sent a fellow to see me last night who told me that Bain was planning a dirty deal against Fenelon and asked if I wanted to learn about it before he could spring it. I told the chap to tell Salver yes, of course. The fellow,—he was that little hunchback, Garth, that hangs around the hotel stables in town, Bob,—the hunchback promised that Salver would come out here—I haven't been well enough to get into town—would come out here, last night. Salver didn't come and I got worried. I believed Punk had learned something and I didn't dare to wait. I tried to get hold of Fenelon, but he was out of town. So this morning I wrote a note of warning—just a bluff—to frighten Bain if I could, till I could get hold of Salver's story. Donna took the note to town, Mr. Randall, and King was going to meet her and take it to Bain. King tells me you chanced to become the messenger!" He turned his fine eyes, so much like his sister's, again

upon me, and I nodded. The girl looked at me also, but she was a little paler than she had been and she did not smile.

"Well," said Philbric, "after Donna had gone—in fact she was scarcely out of sight of the house—Punk Salver turned up here. And he brought with him a small bunch of correspondence." He looked up at the physician. "Doctor Graham," he said, "could I dream one part of a tale like this and have the other part so painfully real?"

The doctor's brows drew together slightly, but he answered promptly: "Don't take my chance questions so seriously, Hal."

"Well," went on the boy, "he *did* bring those letters—mysterious as it is—and he showed them to me; and of all the accursed plots to injure a good man of which you ever heard, they revealed the worst. They were absolutely incriminating evidence against Judson Bain and Wheeler Scancey, too, of conspiracy—to ruin the reputation of Martin Fene-lon by connecting him through a cleverly constructed chain of circumstantial evidence with a—a scandal—with the kind of scandal that sticks like pitch even when a man can eventually prove his innocence."

King made an inarticulate exclamation but shook his head when Hal turned toward him inquiringly.

"Of course Punk wanted to sell the letters to me. He frankly acknowledged stealing them—out of the safe in Bain's office. He was a clever little piece of villainy, was Salver, King."

"I know he was," answered the other.

"He worked for a safe-maker once, and he learned enough about locks to—to ruin him," said Philbric soberly. "But I got mad at the manner of the little blackmailer. He went to school here in the village when I did and had known me all of my life, but he talked to me about the theft and about my buying the letters in a way to turn the stomach of any man. And I talked sharp to him. But I did not dream that he would or could resent my epithets—though they were harsh—as he did. He got mad, too, and grew abusive; and we went from word to word into a regular quarrel. I acted like a fool, I know, because my confounded nerves are all out of control. But it came to a point finally where he suddenly said he would not let me have the letters for love or money but would go back and sell them to Judson Bain, and he meant it."

Philbric rose from his chair and stood before the hearth with his hands clasped behind him. He was evidently striving for mastery of himself and any one with an eye to observe could have seen what was his malady. He was a victim of neurasthenia, or close to it—that dread affliction that is like the quicksand in its treacherous engulfing grip, against which most struggling is worse than vain. His impulse to movement as he stood there in the midst of his battle for self-control was evidenced in a quick intermittent rising upon his toes, with the strain of his tense nerves showing in every line of

his face and body. But he went on with his tale almost without pause.

"I was furious then," he said, "and I made up my mind that he should not get out of this house with such evidence as that. He had kept possession of the letters, you understand—his hands upon them every moment.

"Well, I told him that if he didn't give me the letters I'd take them away from him; and then things happened so fast I can hardly be sure of the sequence. He tried to get out of that window and couldn't master the latch. He could have broken a pane, but the panes are small and he evidently saw he couldn't escape through the space of one. The other windows were impossible because of the bookcases. But while he was fumbling I ran to the hall door and yelled for John—for help. I called half a dozen times, I suppose, but nobody seemed to be in hearing. Then I ran back and found Punk at the library table drawer.

"I had a revolver in there but I had not thought of it. How he knew it is past my finding out. But he drew out the gun and when I rushed at him he fired at me. He missed me and I grabbed the pistol. Even as weak as I am now I was too strong for him, for he was a worn-out little bum and loafer, you know. So I got the revolver. In the next second, though, he seized that bronze ash-tray there and swung it as a club and rushed at me. And he would have smashed my head if I hadn't shot in

self-defense. It *was* self-defense, Bob. I swear I kept my wits, for I was cooler than earlier. But I hit the fellow in a vital spot. Good God! I didn't mean to do that!"

He suddenly stopped and the very tears welled up out of his eyes. Then he turned to the physician again. "Doctor, it's exactly as I told you. He fell right there on the rug—only they've taken away the one he fell on now—and he hadn't gotten out of my reach a single instant."

"Well," said King, "what about it? He got shot and deserved it. You fired in self-defense. Your word will hardly be questioned."

I glanced at the physician. Something in his face warned me that the tale was not yet all told.

The boy started forward at King's words. "No, by Heaven!" he cried. "How can they? It was self-defense!"

"Well, don't excite yourself, Hal," said King.

I looked quickly at the girl, Donna. She was sitting half on the edge of the table. She was leaning forward breathless, gazing miserably at her brother. Her hands were so tightly gripped on the oak table-top that they had turned white across the backs.

"Don't you believe me, Doctor?" cried the boy, suddenly whirling again to Graham.

"I believe you tell the absolute truth," said the physician, but in his tone was a qualification.

I forgot in my interest and concern that my right

to interfere was questionable. Involuntarily I started up, looking at the doctor's face.

"Man," I said, "what's the matter? The boy's story is straight and the circumstantial evidence is abundant. This robbery occurred. Salver came here with these letters. The bronze tray was on the floor. Philbric's gun undoubtedly had two empty chambers. There's a bullet-hole here somewhere in the wall or floor of course, and—why, the letters themselves are enough proof to support the word of a man like Philbric."

The doctor looked at me with a curl of scorn on his lips and I disliked the man from that moment—perhaps perfectly naturally. But his answer took the heart out of me so suddenly that it was like a blow in the face.

"There were *three* empty chambers in Philbric's pistol, sir," he said. "There is no discoverable bullet mark in walls, floor or ceiling of this room—and the letters—the letters, sir, that Philbric thinks—that Philbric saw, have not been discovered. A search has been made, from the pockets of the man who brought them, to every inch of this room, which he did not leave alive after showing them. It has not revealed a shred of them. We searched Clarence Salver's clothing to the last rag, and we went over this room with the minutest care. The letters, sir, which Hal says he saw—cannot be found."

CHAPTER V

A DAYLIGHT MYSTERY

I REMEMBER how the sunlight lay on the top of the mahogany table against which Donna Philbric was leaning and how the reflection caught me in the eyes as I turned to look at her after the doctor's startling statement. It dazzled me and the effect seemed for the moment like the effect of the statement itself. Then I saw how the girl's eyes fastened themselves on the physician's face with such a question in them that I grasped the deeper significance of what he had told—the opinion he was already inclining to—that lay back of the immediate mystery. And I thought I should never forgive the man for the suggestion he allowed to enter her mind and Hal's.

We sat and stood almost in a circle, the five of us. The aunt whom King had mentioned had not appeared. Donna, now at my right against the table, Hal in the big chair next to her, then the doctor standing and then King in one of the old-style high-backed chairs that came away up above his head. The fire was snapping on the hearth and sending little curling wisps of smoke up the chimney. Reflections from it, too, glowed redly in pol-

ished surfaces of chairs, andirons, vases, tiles. The gold of the sunlight mingled with the deeper colors of the firelight with wonderfully bright and cheerful effect. And there we faced together the threat of the most remarkable situation I have ever known.

My mind went rapidly over the story again the moment it was concluded and the facts stood out so clearly that I could find no flaw to alter the case as it first loomed up in strange menace. Hal had shot Salver. That he admitted, and the evidence allowed no doubt of it. I did not doubt either that every word of the boy's own story was true. But the attitude that a jury might take toward this thing was a matter to consider most assuredly, and the doctor's addition to the boy's tale seemed to have swept every vestige of supporting evidence away from Philbric's story.

One's first instinct, when facts seem stubbornly unbendable to support belief, is toward angry rebellion. Of course I questioned the doctor's facts. How was it possible that the letters could have disappeared utterly if this Salver had never left the room after showing them to Hal? He certainly would not destroy them by throwing them into the grate. And if he had not destroyed them only one thing was possible. They were still in that room, no matter how carefully the search had been made. Also if a revolver had been fired twice—possibly three times—in a room the bullets must have made marks somewhere. One had struck Salver. The other or

others had struck something else. And yet the idea that anything like a careful search for evidence had been made and had resulted in finding nothing to bear out the tale the boy told—nothing but the fact of Salver's death—was, to say the least, startling.

It was the unmistakable meaning in the doctor's queer looks, however, that roused my ire. He could not have presented his theory more clearly in words than he did in his implication. He had begun at the very beginning by casting doubt upon Hal's certainty of memory and he had ended now with a thing that he might as well have spoken out—a suggestion that the tale the boy told was a mixture of fact and of hallucination.

Of course Philbric's condition gave color to this idea and perhaps the scientific mind would naturally lean toward such an explanation. It was conceivable that a man in a condition of serious nervous disorder might be deceived in details in such a case. But to my mind such an hypothesis to cover principal facts in a case as vital as this was more than absurd. No man could "dream," as Hal had expressed it, that he saw such letters as Hal described and dream it to such convincing effect as to precipitate a fatal fight. Naturally, if one were to presuppose insanity on Philbric's part, he might accept anything in the way of erratic thought or action. But Philbric was not insane, certainly, and the known facts supported enough of his story to give all the weight of probability to the rest of it. Still—and my own mind

hesitated here also—a jury in court would have to have something more tangible than probability.

I would not tolerate the physician's theory for a moment. He appeared to me to be the sort of man whom scientific knowledge had spoiled. He could not allow any one else—especially any lay person—to have an opinion on facts upon which his lore might find a bearing. That was why my first attitude toward the whole case was one of impatience and disgust. I could scarcely wait decently for an opportunity to propose a new search for facts. I am of the sort who have to be shown—a not always admirable quality, I must confess—but I like to see things with my own eyes and feel them with my own hands before yielding absolute credence.

But I had not long to wait, for Hal himself gave us the chance. We had talked a half hour, I suppose, since I had come in. The morning's events had been a strain on the boy greater than a well man can understand, I have no doubt. I could see enough of the effects myself to know that there was danger of injury being done him which would not be readily repaired. But I could not anticipate the effect that would show itself there and then in such a way as to add most seriously to our problem.

We were discussing the story he had told, holding it up in the light of each one's intelligence, in turn, as it were. There was plenty to say. There were questions to be asked and reasked, points to be gone over, theories to be advanced and answered, and ten-

tative suggestions for immediate action put forward. I will not repeat them here. They simmered down to the same thing and they changed not the main facts. And it was in the very midst of it all that Hal suddenly broke down. I did not see it coming. Donna told me afterwards that she feared it. I was quite unprepared and correspondingly shocked by the thing when the young man—for man he was despite his youth and his illness—gave way to the strain.

It was simply a burst of tears. That doesn't sound like much to concern one's self over in view of all that is known and understood of hysteria. But it is not pleasant to see another human being's self-control broken and Philbric was of a type in which it seemed to me peculiarly painful. When the break came, suddenly, in the midst of our conversation, it seemed to me for the moment the most unreal thing that had occurred. To see the keen-eyed, intellectual, apparently clear-headed fellow—who despite his nervous symptoms had told us an extraordinarily straight narrative of what had occurred—to see him suddenly bending his head into his hands and sobbing, like a child that is hurt or like an emotional girl, was a shock indeed.

It was very quick and the response from the sister and from the doctor, who, to my thinking, had had no small part in bringing it on, was instant. I turned away. I could offer no help. King, I remember, went to the girl's assistance. I felt the first

return at that moment of my lost sense of strangeness in the house, which had dropped from me quickly indeed. The only thing I could do was to stand aside and let the intimate friends of the boy care for him.

The fit of crying seemed uncontrollable for a time and it eventually ended our joint discussion of the case. The boy himself begged to be taken away to the privacy of his own room and the doctor approved of this. But Philbric was quite capable of going unaided, though he could not stop the convulsive weeping that held him in its grip. And so they went out quickly together, the boy and his physician and the sister whose face wore a look of distress and dismay that weighed upon my spirit heavily.

I liked King the better for the self-contained manliness of his attitude in this unhappy incident. He was not too solicitous—simply kind and strong. I began to think that he was a fellow after my own heart, the quick liking for him springing as readily as my swift feeling of sympathy for the brother and sister. If there was then underneath the surface any sting in the fact that he very evidently stood in the enviable position of close friend to the sweet girl toward whom I could not but acknowledge my own growing interest, I was not keenly conscious of it.

He remained with me when the three were gone and our eyes met with mutual understanding. We

exchanged no words on the immediate happening, however. He shook his head ever so slightly. Then without waiting he crossed to the mantel and rang the bell for John.

The old man came promptly at the call. His smooth old face was full of pain that indicated clearly enough his knowledge of his young master's condition; but King went sharply to work questioning him as a salutary antidote for the thing that depressed us all.

"John," he began, "you were here when all this searching took place. Tell Mr. Randall and me all about it."

The old man looked with some relief from one to the other of us.

"Well, Mr. King," he replied, "I expect Master Hal has told you all of it. We searched. The coroner and the doctor made the first search. Then the officers—the sheriff was here and the reporters—we all searched, sir. The first surprise came of course when we couldn't locate the papers that Punk Salver brought with him. We made our first look for them."

"Did you think of the fire, John?" asked King.

"Yes, sir, I did," answered the man. "I looked in the grate almost the first thing when I knew the letters were gone. The fire looked clean and clear and not as if papers had been burned up on it."

"Of course coal has been put upon it since," suggested King.

"Oh yes, sir. It's about five hours, sir, since the—shooting."

"Just so. Where else did you look?"

"Well, sir, the men here looked everywhere, it seems. But you know how it is—it never satisfies you for another person to look for a thing that you want to find. So I looked, too. It may sound foolish but it doesn't seem so either when you think how queer this is, but I couldn't stop with the likely places. I looked in the unlikely ones, too."

"What unlikely ones?"

"Well, sir, I looked under the rugs."

"Good," said King. "That sounds thorough."

"Oh, the search was surely thorough, sir, though I can't, for the life of me, think why the papers haven't been found. I even looked behind the curtains, sir, and back of the radiators. It occurred to me that that little rascal, Salver, might have been quick enough to think of some strangely good hiding place with the idea of coming back later and committing another robbery to get his letters."

"He might."

"Yes, sir. It seems to me the only thing he could have done. And he hid them well."

King walked across to the window where Salver had made his attempt to escape.

"Hal says he tried first to get out, here," he said. "Here's the place to begin."

I followed him. "I can imagine how those reporters scoured this room for evidence," I answered.

I turned the lace curtains at the window and looked them over from top to bottom while my mind went over Philbric's account of just what had happened.

"Let's make a hunt on our own account," pursued King. "Donna and Hal will be willing enough to have us."

"Did you look in the table drawer where the gun was, John?" I asked.

"Yes, sir," answered the servant.

"Where is the revolver now?"

"The coroner took it, sir."

"Did you look it over?"

"Yes, sir. They made me look at it for evidence's sake, I suppose, sir."

"Three chambers were empty?" asked King.

"Three chambers had empty shells in them, sir, as the doctor said."

"And the rest were loaded?" asked I.

"With ball ca'tridge, sir."

"That seems queer," said King. "Three shots fired and no trace of two of them."

"Philbric says only two were fired," I suggested.

"Well, the evidence is against him there."

"One shell may have been empty before," said I.

"That's what the coroner says," put in John. "And Master Hal can't be sure that it wasn't so, even though he thinks he is. He loaded the pistol some days ago after he had used it to frighten away a hawk that was flying around our chickens, sir."

"Hal has some fancy chickens," explained King to me.

"And the gun may not have been fully reloaded after that shooting, sir," said the servant.

"Of course it may not."

"But two shots were fired here," I remarked. "One was stopped by this thieving little black-mailer. Where did the other go?"

"That's one of the mysteries, sir," replied John.

"Where did Hal stand? About here, didn't he?" asked King, placing himself near the door of the library.

"No, sir. He says he ran forward toward Punk."

"Well, when Punk fired Hal was between him and the door?"

"Yes, sir, according to his account."

"Well, Hal's accurate enough, it seems to me. Now the bullet might have gone out of the doorway."

"It might, sir," said John. "But there's a plain wall on the opposite side of the hall and we've been over it with the utmost care. There's no bullet-hole there."

We were all examining the side and ceiling on the wall in which was the door. For myself I scanned it, from the tops of the low bookcases that stood against the wainscot to the moulding and around all sides of the door casing. The bookcases themselves, with large glass doors intact, coming flush to the floor in front and standing solidly.

together, showed that no pistol ball could have touched them. John had told us that the revolver was a light one, a thirty-two caliber, and the hole such a ball would make might be easy to miss. Still, as I looked over the papered wall and the door casing I could see no place where such a mark could hide.

The floor was of waxed hardwood. Rugs lay upon it. King and I began pulling them about and presently John was helping us; and we were plunged into a search so thorough that I would have taken my oath at the end that we had not missed an inch of that wall, ceiling or floor that could have been marked by a bullet. I began to feel the oppression of deepening mystery as we went over the story and over the search again and again. It seemed quite unexplainable.

We broke away from the quest for the bullet's course after a time, however, and turned again to look for a possible place of hiding for the letters. There was only one theory to go upon in this, it seemed, and that was that Salver had hidden them somehow and somewhere during the brief moment or two while Hal was out of the room calling to John for help. That was the only conceivable explanation of their disappearance. And the things we did in that room before we finished that end of our task are almost laughable. We looked in every book in the cases at that end of the room. We looked behind the books. We moved the cases out from

the wall and looked behind them. We looked behind pictures on the wall, in the vases that stood beside the fireplace, in the drawer of the table and behind it in the recesses of the table's framework. I even unscrewed the tops of the fire-screen's upright frames, which were hollow tubing of brass, and looked in them. One porcelain vase on a stand by the window had so small a neck that it did not seem possible any roll of letters could have been pushed into it, yet we examined that, even getting a stiff wire and bending it so that we could explore the interior of the thing with it. Everything we could think of we did, but the whole was fruitless. No letters were to be found.

It seemed a bit uncanny, too, when Doctor Graham came back and joined us and told us then how all this had been done before, how even the tiles in the fireplace had been examined and the chimneypiece above the reach of the blaze had been searched. He described how he had found the body of Salver lying on the floor where Philbric had had the good sense to leave it after it was certain that the man was dead. He added that the boy had shown remarkable forethought in preserving such evidence as there was in his favor, and it seemed so to me. It was not more than ten minutes after the shooting that the doctor himself had arrived, for he had been at home when John had telephoned and had been the first to come into the place, except the servant, after Philbric fired the fatal shot.

CHAPTER VI

AN INHERITANCE WAITS

I ASKED a question about a matter that had not been explained to me.

"What was in the letters? What was the scandal Bain and Scancey were trying to fasten on the Philbrics' friend?"

"Oh," answered the doctor, "they schemed to involve Fenelon in a story that would connect him with a young woman here in this village who has recently gotten into trouble—the most wretched of woman's troubles."

"Would it be so easy to make such a thing stick?"

"You remember what Hal said about it?" asked King. "He expressed the truth. Such a story, if cleverly started, would damage a man's reputation were it wholly untrue."

"Hal said there was plenty of trumped-up circumstantial evidence," said Graham.

Of course this was secondary to our main matter for concern, but it was a point to consider. It occurred to me that the woman might know something that would be useful to us. I said so.

"The officers will look to that," said Graham.

"Barnaby, Philbric's lawyer, wouldn't even come out here to see Hal till he had looked for her and for the hunchback who brought Salver's first message. He's after them now, no doubt. He'll be out here to-night."

I felt again that the doctor scorned my suggestions and took some satisfaction in showing me that they were all anticipated. Indeed, I had the feeling toward the man that he was inclined to block investigation on my part and I resented it. Doubtless he resented my presence there at all and perhaps he had a right to, though, with Miss Donna's welcome and King's friendly attitude, such a posture toward me seemed to indicate mere ill humor.

We came to a sort of halt when we reached this point in our conversation. We expected Miss Philbric to return and she did not come. That was something that served in a measure to suspend action. The doctor discussed Philbric's condition but neither King nor I asked him his theory as to how far we could safely presume upon facts in the boy's story as related. I was too much incensed at the suggestion he had thrown out and King had doubtless already heard his opinion in their talk on the porch.

There seemed to be little finally for us to do. The doctor announced his intention of remaining for a time. King wished to return to town as soon as possible and see the coroner and other officers and to meet the lawyer, Barnaby, when he should arrive

from the city, whither it had been ascertained he had followed a clue to the whereabouts of the girl mentioned.

It was while I was asking him if he would not make use of me in any way that would help the Philbric cause that a maid came to the library door and interrupted us with a message that surprised me.

"Mr. Randall?" she asked.

"This is Mr. Randall," said King promptly, indicating me.

"Mr. Philbric wants to see you, sir," she said quickly.

I looked at the doctor, then at King. It was certainly a curious thing that the boy should send for me. But King nodded promptly and I rose. I followed the maid out into the wide hall and she led me at once up the broad staircase to the floor above. The afternoon sun was shining into windows up there also, and the whole house seemed full of light. It did not feel to me like a house of shadow despite what had happened and I determined that the best thing for our poor nervous boy was to let him think we felt no apprehensions.

The maid led me to a room not far from the head of the stairs, and I found brother and sister together. The boy was seated in a big easy-chair by the open window. He wore a great ulster-like coat and his knees were covered with a rug. On his head was a red-and-white knit skating cap that covered practically all of his hair. It was a garb he

wore, I later learned, when sitting in the porch or in a room of which the windows were wide open as was now the case. He seemed to have a terror of cold. The boy was quiet now and I do not deny that I felt a distinct pleasure again in the intimate relation into which the moment brought me. I was welcomed with a simple friendliness that robbed me of my fear of being considered the interloper.

"Hal wanted to see you," said Miss Donna simply as I entered. "Didn't the doctor tell you?"

"No, he did not," I answered, and felt a sudden accession of dislike and distrust for the man.

"That's odd," said the girl. She started to say more but her brother broke in.

"Randall," he said quickly, "you came by a lucky chance for me to-day. Where are you bound for?"

"I was going up to the city," I answered him.

"You've been involuntarily plunged into this trouble of ours and I'm sorry for it. But I wish I could explain to you how much good you've done me."

I smiled. It sounded like the exaggerated enthusiasm of a boy. I was a little surprised, too, that he could find voice or thought for it. But I did not anticipate what was coming.

"Must you hurry on?" asked Philbric suddenly.

"I'm on the way to see my uncle's lawyers," I explained.

"Oh yes. You are the heir, are you not?" said the boy frankly.

"Yes."

"Could that wait a few days? I know it's an unreasonable thing to ask, but I would give a good deal if you could stay here with me—with us. I'll tell you why. It's perfectly easy to read in your face and in your words that you believe me quite sane."

"Sane!" I exclaimed. "Why, man——"

He held up his hand. "I know," he answered, "but Doctor Graham has already doubted me, and King knows enough of all the fool stunts I have done in the last few weeks to bias him. I am sick—there's no doubt of that. But I'm not crazy and I like a man at hand who believes I'm not."

I laughed. It sounded sane surely and my faith rose with his request. Also my heart leaped and then contracted again with a slow sense of guilt as I realized what such an invitation meant to me and why. I looked at the beautiful girl who sat beside the boy and saw her eyes wide with appeal to me, quite innocent of anything that could suggest consciousness that I might feel temptation because of her.

"If you could stay it would be a real comfort to Hal," she said.

"Well," said I, "there isn't a thing in the world to hurry me of course. Frankly there is nothing I would like better than to stay, particularly if I can be of use to you. I'm a rank outsider but I don't feel so, I assure you."

"It's extraordinary for me to ask such a thing,"

said Hal quickly. "But you can grant a whim of a sick man, can't you? I think you are the sort who can do just that."

I assented. I could not have decided otherwise if more had depended on my presence in the city than the mere formalities of taking over my inheritance. That would wait—surely that would wait while I stayed to play out my hand in the game into which I had been drawn.

"I'll send a man up to the station in the city for your luggage," said Philbric, and presently the thing was done. And then, as much surprised at the turn affairs had taken as any similarly placed being could be, I began adjusting my ideas to the situation.

It was by a simple artifice that Donna got me out of the room and into the hall with herself soon after the invitation was given and accepted. She suggested that she would show me the room that would be mine that I might make free to come and go. She said that she herself must attend now to matters that had so far been neglected in the turmoil into which the house had been thrown, and I suggested that I could remain with her brother till she returned. I went with her, therefore, out of the presence of Hal. In the hall she stopped me at a little distance from his door.

"What do you think?" she asked abruptly.

"I think we shall have little difficulty with this case," I answered her.

I looked down into her lovely face, filled with her

affectionate anxiety for her brother. In her beauty I could not but delight, but it was not that alone that made my vivid consciousness of her nearness to me so sweet that I caught my very breath at the thrill of it.

But she was not thinking of any such thing. She was only dissatisfied with my answer and wanted a better one.

"I mean what about Hal?" she persisted.

"He is safe," I said.

"Is he? Is he quite, quite safe?" Her voice sank to a whisper and she seemed to forget entirely that I was but a stranger.

"Of course," said I. "People are human beings. The authorities will recognize exactly what we do, and whether we find all the supporting evidence we desire for the boy's story or not, everybody is bound to take the same view."

"Doctor Graham thinks—he suggests that—perhaps Hal doesn't remember all the details," she murmured.

"Doctor Graham believes his story to be entirely true."

"Yes, he says so. But he means that he believes that Hal thinks it is all true. Hal is telling what he believes are all the facts."

"Hal is telling the facts," I asserted. She was tremulous in her anxiety. Indeed, she showed now more of the shock that had come to her from the terrible happening than she had shown at all, and

I who had looked with a man's eyes on the thing began to realize as I had not before just how awful the tragedy must appear to her. I was confident—too confident—that Hal Philbric would have no difficulty to prove the facts he had related to us, but I felt a truer sympathy for the girl then than before.

“And you don't think—as the doctor does?” she asked.

Her eyes were almost piteously pleading.

“I think,” I began, and then I hesitated. I believed the doctor's suggestion that there was any question of Philbric's clarity of recollection was ridiculous and I wanted to say so. But I remembered that he was the family physician and paused. Instantly she misunderstood.

“Don't you think,” she whispered, “that Hal knows?” Suddenly her hand came out and caught my arm with a hard little clasp. “Don't you think he is—he is sane?”

Her touch went through me like an electric shock. I felt it to the last fiber of me. I stood looking down upon her, there in the light of the late afternoon sun which touched her dark hair with the glow of rich color till it seemed like a glory to her, and I saw that hers was a wonderful perfection. I knew not how it was or why, but I could not command the feeling that was rising in me toward this girl. I could only hold in check the expression that passion ever rushes compellingly to the lips, and

cover as I might the signs that I had no right to show. I looked her in the eyes and answered.

"Your brother is as sane as you—or I," I told her.

A moment more and she had pointed out to me the room that was mine, had left me at the door and was gone, and I stood looking from a high window down upon the buds of the maple trees and wondering if I myself could claim sanity at all, or if my own brain had not suddenly run mad to hold the thoughts that were rioting there.

It was minutes before I could go back to Philbric. When I did the boy's bright eyes were eagerly watchful to greet me.

"I'm a fool, I suppose," he said, with ready ease of confidence that seemed to me to promise well for better self-control presently. "I'm a fool to take what Doctor Graham said so literally and to build imaginings out of it. He suggested that I might have mixed real and unreal in my excitement and it frightened me."

"It shouldn't."

"No. But I've been afraid sometimes that I could not keep the upper hand when things tried my nerves very much. I made an exhibition of myself just now. You can see how serious it is."

He was very calm in speaking of it. He seemed almost not to care that he had so broken down. But as I glanced at his hands I saw them tightly clasped on his knees almost as if they were wrung together.

"I sympathize with you, my dear boy," I told him. "But I believe you are quite as perfectly possessed of your full and complete faculties as any of us ever are."

"That's what I felt sure of about you, Randall. It's a very strange thing your coming here so. But I'm downright thankful for it. It's a whim maybe that I want you, but I feel more strongly than I can tell you that you can help me."

"Good," said I.

"It's a strange thing to feel the responsibility—for the death of a man. I feel it very keenly. I am uncomfortably aware of the figure of that poor little dead bum down there on the library rug—who died because I shot him. Can you wonder that I like to feel that a man like you believes I am quite right in my mind when I have that clinging image in my brain and have to set up as a shield my memory of the reason why I killed him?"

He still spoke quite calmly but his words conveyed a sense of his feeling that was startling. I felt the stir of a newer anxiety about him of which I had not thought before. But I answered brashly, "If I had shot a man in self-defense—a burglar, a highwayman—I would worry little about it."

He looked at me long and steadily, then he shook his head, and his smile came back a little.

"Strange, strange!" he said. "Dan Randall! You are Dan Randall!"

I laughed. "You are determined to make a mys-

tery of this for me," I said. "When have you known me? In some former life? I've certainly never made reputation enough anywhere in this for you to have heard of me."

His smile continued. "You little know," he said.

We were quiet for a moment, and then the boy abruptly turned his head. "Do you know," he said, "I believe I could sleep. I haven't slept well for some time at night and my best time is mid-afternoon. I'm rather done up, but your promise to stay has done a lot to quiet my jumping nerves. Would you mind if I slept?"

"Of course not. Take a nap and we'll all fall to and settle this thing when you wake up," said I.

"You go down and talk to Donna and to the doctor and King again," he said. "King is a fine chap, Randall," he added rather suddenly.

"He looks it," I answered.

"And you," said the boy, "you look just as I might have expected you would—only better. Randall, this will be the beginning of acquaintance for you, but we know you already."

It was as if he meant to draw a question, but I would not ask another. I rose and walked toward the door. "Sleep up, old fellow," I said. "I'll call on you later."

He closed his eyes and nodded languidly. I stood a moment watching him. Then I turned to the stairway.

I went downstairs rather slowly. I was much

more stirred by all the long day's occurrences than I had cared to show to Philbric. Each review of what I had already experienced that day made me wonder more at the strangeness of it. I began to be half superstitiously of the opinion that fortune had indeed flung me a special gift and whimsically cherished the notion that further favor was to be mine. I was absorbed in thought of it as I approached the library door, thinking how much of what Hal had said I should tell to his sister, when, as I reached the threshold, I heard low voices within. Before I became conscious of intrusion I had looked up and had seen, not the two men I had left, but a man and a girl standing by the hearth-mantel. They were close together, the girl with her back against the marble, the other—tall, handsome, black-haired fellow that he was, a fine figure of a man—standing before her, his hand upon her very shoulder. And I heard the murmur of Donna Philbric's voice distinctly, as, quite unconscious of my sudden coming, she stood looking earnestly up into Robert King's face.

"Please not now, Bob. Please don't—not now," she was saying.

I turned away swiftly and crossed to the billiard room across the great hall. There I walked to the window and looked out upon the sunlit lawn and felt a pain like a physical agony grip the heart of me.

CHAPTER VII

THRUST UNDER GUARD

THE papers had it that night—a blazing three-column head in most of them with Hal's picture, obtained by unexplained means, and his story dressed up in all the newswriter's most dramatic terms.

The flaring sheets came out to us on the early evening trains and John brought me a copy with my bags, which had been found and brought out also. I was alone in my own room after a wandering walk in the grounds and then a longer tramp on the country-road in an effort to avoid immediate meeting again with Donna and to keep out of reach of the doctor.

King had gone up to the city, I learned from the servant, and later he had telephoned that he had met Barnaby, but that neither of them would come out that night, because of work to do there. This seemed odd to me, but I gave very little attention to it at the time; neither did I read the newspaper's account of our story for the simple reason that Hal sent for me soon after the sheet came and I did not want to take the thing with me to him. When he asked about the papers, too, I advised him not to

read them till next day, and Donna herself avoided them. So it happened that we did not get the full significance of the tale in its public telling at once.

We spent the evening together. Doctor Graham took himself off early, much to my own satisfaction, for I had come to look upon him in the light of an antagonist at every point. But the aunt of whom I had heard joined us after a day spent in her room, and I was almost as sorry to have her about, for she was a nervous, anxious, fussy body who could have but a poor effect on Hal.

I gathered quickly from conversation now details of the family's circumstances with which I was unacquainted. Father and mother were dead. Aunt Charlotte, as they called her, was the father's sister and had lived for years with the children, who were amply provided with money from their father's estate. Indeed, the possessions of the family were unmistakably large, so chance remarks indicated plainly. Hal had been away at school up to the time of an illness the year before when a fever had pulled him down badly. He had afterwards suffered severely with what had been called by Doctor Graham a condition bordering on nervous prostration. He had partially recovered again in time to take a hand in Fenelon's campaign for the senatorship in which he was ardently interested, and he spent himself in writing material for campaign and for the papers in active fight against the man Bain. He was now suffering more heavily for

his overwork and was unquestionably in a serious condition.

There were all the contradictions both in appearance and in capacity at different hours that show themselves in cases of his kind. He did not always look like a sick man. He was in good flesh and had good color, and, except in times of greatest stress, he did not show very plainly the abnormal symptoms of his malady. But that he was wretchedly weak with that peculiarly treacherous weakness of undermined nervous force was clear enough. Under the circumstances it was peculiarly unfortunate that the thing which had come upon him should have occurred. It would have been hard enough for any normally strong and healthy man to have such a break in the peace of his life and to be loaded with such a weight of responsibility. The thing was worse than a misfortune to this boy; I could see that it was a menace upon his immediate future.

It would be hard to keep up his spirits, I fully understood, as we talked together that night, and so I tried to cheer them all. We made an attempt to keep away from discussion of the day's events, which was, of course, fruitless. Aunt Charlotte must needs tell reminiscences of Punk Salver, who had been a ne'er-do-well of the village from Hal's boyhood. Hal could not but dwell morbidly on the doctor's cursed suggestion as to the completeness of his command of his faculties at the time of the shooting, and Donna herself was so overweighed

with the sense of the tragedy that she became rather distraught. I attempted to hearten them by hard common sense, arguing the obvious things I had argued before.

But we spent a rather painful evening, and when I went to my room at the end of it I was even a trifle depressed myself.

But morning brought a situation that I, at least, had not anticipated, and a development of the case that was startling enough. Remembering my promise to Judson Bain, made at the time of the clash in his office, I had telephoned in to the little suburban hotel at Hazelhurst, as the town was called, that I would be at the Philbric home in case I was wanted. I had not heard from my antagonist who had so rudely started me upon the path I was now not unwillingly traveling. But when I descended to the library after John's call had roused me to the new day, I found King and Barnaby there before me with news indeed.

They had the morning papers, and prominent on the first page I found my own part in the day's affairs set forth in surprising fashion. Briefly, I was charged with assault upon Bain and Scancey in their offices at Hazelhurst. Of course the affair was associated with the Philbric case and the shooting of Punk Salver, but, as my clash with Bain had occurred before news of the shooting of Salver had reached the town, there was more or less of a mystery made of this also.

The story about my fracas was from Bain and Scancey, of course, and why no legal proceedings had been started against me I was at first at a loss to understand. But when I turned from the story of my affair to the latest on Philbric's, I myself almost forgot the thing. Barnaby, who was a stout, gray, competent-looking fellow of thirty-eight or so, slightly bald but otherwise looking more pugnacious than studious, called my attention to the seriousness of the new aspect upon the case before I had had time to grasp it, however.

"Hal has put a weapon into Bain's hands now," he said laconically.

"How so?" I asked, as I endeavored to get all the meaning of the headings in one eager glance.

"He's played straight into Bain's hands," said King.

"If he had only waited before talking," said the lawyer, "we'd have a simple case with nothing to prove but that the boy killed Salver in self-defense, and with nobody deeply interested to prove the opposite."

My eyes lighted on a line in the paper's headings that held them fixed and made me gasp.

"You mean——" I began.

"I mean that Bain has now, of course, every reason on earth for endeavoring to prove Philbric's story false."

"And he will attempt it?"

"He has commenced."

"He has denied the story of the letters," said King. "He talks wildly—too wildly for the papers to quote him exactly. They don't dare yet. But they will to-day. Randall, Bain charges murder against our boy and he has undertaken to stand as accuser."

It was the line I had seen in the paper.

"But they can't support such a charge," I answered, half combatively even toward these friends of my friends.

"What they might do with the simple murder charge is also an open question," said Barnaby. "But they have made a clever story that is going to be terribly hard to fight. They claim that they themselves sent Salver to Hal with a verbal message warning him to retract certain statements he had made in the papers."

I dropped the paper. The story was being more succinctly told by the lawyer.

"They claim to have sent Punk Salver?"

"Yes. They admit that their office was robbed but claim now that it was only an incident—a coincidence, perhaps. But they say, and they mean to push the charge, that Philbric's story of the letters alleged to reveal a conspiracy on their part against Fenelon is a pure creation of Philbric's brain."

"They have that opportunity," said I.

"They have, indeed," exclaimed King, with more excitement than I had seen him show. "But they have taken the cleverest possible way—and the most

damnable. They do not charge that a boy of the family and reputation of Hal Philbric is a common liar and a wilful murderer. They take far more dangerous ground than that. They charge, Randall, that our boy is insane."

I can scarcely describe the shock of the thing to me. I shall not try. I was without words to reply and I listened to the lawyer's summing up of the points in the case with a sickening realization that the situation was simply overwhelming.

"Hal has been sick a long time with serious nervous symptoms," said Barnaby. "Everybody knows that. He has been an enemy of Bain's and his most recent breakdown has come because of his intense activity in the campaign against the man. People would not readily credit crime from a boy like Hal. They would not be surprised that his mind was affected. There isn't one particle of proof yet to support Hal's own statement of what brought Clarence Salver here yesterday, and Scancey—it's he who is the clever one—is smooth enough to seize instantly the opportunity to make the insanity charge still more plausible by claiming that Punk was their agent, and that they knew perfectly well his errand here. Punk will never give his evidence. The girl whose name was coupled with Fenelon's by Bain's scheme has disappeared and so has the hunchback who brought Punk Salver's message to Hal. We can't find them."

"It's fiendishly ingenious," said King.

"It's that," said the lawyer.

"But the very worst of it is," said King, "that the effect on Hal himself may be—may be disastrous."

He looked up at me. His eyes were of the kind so black that retina and pupil are scarcely distinguishable from each other. I remember how they glittered with a light that made me love his spirit as he spoke, for if ever a look showed fight his did at the instant. He was the man who had stepped between me and a mad new-sprung hope, but at that instant I felt drawn to him in a way I have been attracted to few men. He was an element to count on in this fight—and fight it was to be; and I felt the sudden stir of my blood against disheartenment that his words might have brought.

But it was far too serious a suggestion he made to be ignored. Philbric was already worried by Doctor Graham's strangely inconsiderate questions,—which seemed to be positively unprofessional. What might be the effect of a pressing of Bain's charge—of an actual inquiry into the boy's sanity—forced by the men who had every interest in proving him insane? I am not exactly a weakling. I am accounted strong. But I felt like a man whose enemy has caught him under his guard, when first full realization of the case came to me.

But I had not much chance to mingle in the councils of the family that morning. My immunity from the consequences of the battle in Bain's office

was to be short indeed. And it was even while we sat there, the lawyer, King and I, that the town marshal, my friend of the day before, arrived at the house with a request that I go with him to answer to the charge lodged against me. He had a warrant for me in fact, and it had only been due to a neglect of my message to the hotel that I had not heard from the case the day before.

I welcomed the officer's coming. It would give me early chance of facing Bain again, I thought, and there were few things I so much wanted now. I had made no formal charge against him the day before but I would now, and I meant to make it so hot for him that he would have things to think of besides Hal. I hoped there would be trouble indeed at the justice's court when I should arrive, and I was instantly eager to be off.

Both King and Barnaby were surprised at Bain's action, but Barnaby was prompt to call up a lawyer who was associated with himself in Hazelhurst, and ask him to accompany me to my hearing. He himself had enough to do with Hal's affair. I would not hear of King's going with me, either, though he offered to do so. It seemed best to me, too, to go at once and get this officer and this complication out of the house before Donna and Hal appeared. They would have enough to think of when they should learn of Bain's move against them. And so I told King. He agreed with me, but the urgency of his request that I return as soon as I could ar-

range bond—which he himself offered to supply if necessary—was strong. I promised, and, in a quarter hour after the marshal's arrival, he and I were on the road to breakfast in town.

My case, of which my enemy had made nothing more serious than simple assault so far, was naturally to come before the local administrator of justice, and I determined upon what my immediate course would be. I made up my mind that I would waive hearing and be bound over if possible to the county court, so that the greatest publicity might be given the case; and then I would prepare a defense that would end in a counter-charge of more serious nature against the two men who had had the will, indeed, to attack me, and who had only been disappointed because of my good luck in being strong.

My companion was a wholesome, sensible fellow. His name was Clausen, he told me, and we were presently on good terms. He told me also that Bain had seemed curiously eager to press my case the day before when he had first made the charge against me, and that he himself would have been forced to come after me then if any one had known that King had brought me to The Hazels. I had been seen in King's car, but, as I was a stranger and as no one had understood that King intended to take me to the Philbrics' home, they had looked citywards for me. We talked of this a little. But presently my custodian was full of shrewd questions about events at The Hazels, and I found it necessary

to guard my replies well to avoid saying too much.

We arrived at the village hotel without my feeling that I had betrayed a secret or misstated a fact, however, and Clausen waited while I disposed of a cup of coffee. Then we went promptly to the office of the local justice with my anticipation whetted to keen eagerness. There was some interest in my case apparently, too, I judged, for a number of on-lookers had gathered to see what might happen. But, as I entered the place looking about for my enemies and Hal's, surprise indeed was found waiting for me. My lawyer, whose name was Cole, met me at once—a keen-eyed young chap with a good grip in his fingers. And his first greeting was a laugh.

“The charge against you has been withdrawn, Mr. Randall,” he said. “It isn't ten minutes since a lawyer of the village appeared on the scene here acting for Bain and asked that the case be dropped.”

The thing was so astonishing as to be suggestive. I exclaimed, naturally. Then the story was retold with details that added nothing to it. Then came the partial explanation. Bain and Scancey had suddenly been called away from town. Scancey had gone to the city. About Bain there seemed to be a curious story. I did not hear it, however, till I had lodged my own complaint against the two with all necessary formalities, insisting that I would hang every drag I could upon them that might handicap their war upon my friends. Then fully released

from the charge against me, I went with Cole at his invitation to his office and listened to a queer tale.

The day before, as the marshal, Clausen, had told me, Bain had been almost rabid in his desire to prosecute the charge against me and had tried to make the accusation one of assault with intent to do great bodily harm. Scancey had entered the complaint in the less serious form, however, and had tried to quiet Bain's rage. Curiously enough the news of the shooting of Salver at The Hazels was not told to either of them till after the charge against me was filed, because no one cared to approach them with the story of the letters which promptly came out. After the tale came to them, however, by the mouth of a reporter who interviewed them, it was only natural that they should forget the minor affair with me for a time.

They would give no statement for the evening papers, however, except a general denial of Philbric's story; and then they had spent the afternoon and half the night alone in their office, seeing no one who called, until they had admitted reporters again about midnight, and had given out the tale that had appeared in the morning papers. Then came the curious part.

Judson Bain had left his office about one o'clock. Cole himself had seen the man on the street with Scancey, as he, Cole, was returning home at that late hour from a discussion of the startling news at

the hotel. The young lawyer, who lived not far from Bain's residence, had followed the two with some curiosity, and he saw them enter the gates of Bain's place together. He would not have been further attracted to watch, had it not been that just as he was about to turn away, two people, a man and a woman, whom he could see by the light in the street but could not recognize, came hastily up together and entered the grounds behind Bain and Scancey.

So hurried had been the movements of the second pair that Cole out of curiosity had paused to listen and watch. Almost immediately after the four were swallowed up in the shadow of Bain's shrubbery, however, there came the sound of momentary high words quickly quieted. The phrases were not distinguishable. Then all grew abruptly quiet. A moment later, however, Scancey came out of the darkness half running.

Cole stepped behind his own gateway to avoid the man as he passed, and Scancey evidently did not see him. The young lawyer stood quiet after that, waiting, for there was enough of the unusual about all this to stir a deeper interest. When everything remained quiet for some minutes then, however, he had about made up his mind to go in and to bed. He heard the sound of an automobile engine, however, at the Bain garage which was on his own side of Bain's grounds, and he waited again. Presently a machine, evidently Bain's, came out upon the drive

where Cole could see it through the unfledged trees, and immediately afterwards the machine ran quickly to the road and out upon it. Turning, the motor came past Cole's place, and in it the young lawyer saw two men seated, one at the wheel in front, the other in the tonneau. The one in front, he was positive in his own mind, had been Judson Bain. The other was no one he knew, so far as the dim light of street-lamps had revealed. The third person—the woman—had disappeared.

CHAPTER VIII

SHEER HAZARD

TO me, in the light of what had occurred, the story seemed remarkable. Cole told it almost laughingly. He recognized the seriousness of the situation but the mystery appealed to him as humorous rather than sobering. To me, with the memory of Hal and his condition, and of Hal's sister and her anxiety, and with the thought of what must now be their deepened dismay and fear, there was nothing that could excite amusement. I was impatient to learn more. Apparently there was no more, however. Cole had gone in, soon after the occurrence he had seen, and had gone to bed. He had risen in the morning to receive Barnaby's telephone message asking him to meet me and then to learn that the case against me had been suddenly withdrawn.

But I was on fire with curiosity.

"Was Scancey seen in town this morning?" I asked.

"Yes—oh yes. He went to the city early, though."

"And Bain?"

"A reporter told me that the servants at the

house informed him that Mr. Bain had not been home all night."

"Humph! Did Scancey spend the night in his own home?"

"Yes, I believe he did. He was there, but wouldn't see reporters till he went out to send some telegrams about seven o'clock this morning. Then they nailed him—and he gave them a suave good-morning and told them he wouldn't talk again till he saw Bain—which would not be till evening."

"And what about the woman that entered Bain's grounds?"

"Frankly, I don't know. She was probably a servant of the house."

"She might have been."

It was an irritating thing, but it was worth studying certainly. So mysterious a move on the part of our enemy was surely not without some very great significance. I tried to get Cole to reason out something from it, but he was of the cautious kind and I came finally to wonder that he had told me the tale at all. I made up my mind before I left him, however, to follow up each slightest clue I could find, and when I went from his office I was bent upon a new quest.

I 'phoned to The Hazels first and got Barnaby on the wire. I told him of the withdrawal of the case against me and of Bain's absence from town. Also of Scancey's trip to the city. Further than this I did not care to detail over the wire. I told

him I wished to follow a clue that presented itself, and would communicate with the house later.

He informed me in turn that Donna and Hal had been told just the turn the case had taken. It had seemed best to himself and King and to Doctor Graham that they should be frankly informed, as they would be almost certain to learn in some less agreeable way, if their friends attempted to cover the seriousness of the case. He said that Donna acted well. Hal had been excited at first but had become very much quieter later, and was only somewhat too silent now.

I went from the 'phone a good deal depressed with the sense of what must be the pain and suffering of my friends. But my resolution to make war on Judson Bain by every means I could find was only hardened by Barnaby's account of their quiet reception of the attack upon them. I had already started the town marshal on a hunt for Bain, though I had little faith in his success, since he had shown so little keenness in looking for me. I believed that I might have better luck if I gave myself to it, and a plan had already formed itself in my mind. Bain had gone away in haste. Scancey had sent telegrams. There were two things to put together, at least. They might have no connection. Also they might.

I went down the street and inquired casually of the first man I met for the telegraph office. It was a good bet that there was but one in town and so

it proved. I found it. What was more, I found a pretty girl behind the counter there, ready and willing to help me transact my business, and I promptly congratulated myself upon that. I am sure she thought I admired her—and I did.

I raised my hat with utmost punctilious politeness. "Why," said I, with some caution, "you were not here when I was in earlier."

"What time?" she asked, smiling on me kindly.

"Let me see—about seven," I answered.

She shook a curly head at me and laughed. "Not me," she responded.

"That's what I say—not you," said I, trying to make the conversation properly lightsome.

"I don't get around here before eight," she vouchsafed, and my first step was successfully taken.

"You don't mean that you are the operator here, do you?" I asked, looking about curiously.

"Sure thing—eight till six. Sandy's on from seven to eight, mornings, and six till ten, nights."

"That explains it," said I. "It was about seven, I think, that the telegrams were sent."

"Expecting an answer?" she asked glibly.

"Well," said I, "I shall be disappointed if I don't get something from some of them. It's strange nothing has come so far. I thought I'd better come in and look at two or three to be sure that the meaning was quite clear. You have copies of them, haven't you?"

"Sure. The originals are all here." She turned

to her files and drew out a small bunch of the yellow sheets. She thumbed them over carelessly. "What name?" she asked.

I hesitated an instant, and, to cover it, I made the first move that occurred to me. I reached for my pocketbook feigning to search for a paper in it.

"What name?" she repeated.

"Oh," said I, "beg pardon. Scancey."

I waited. If she suspected, I could certainly get no glimpse of those telegrams. If not, I might lay my hands on a clue.

"Scancey!" she said. "You ain't Scancey."

But she laughed. What her mental processes were I don't pretend to know. But I reached for the little bunch of messages. "No," I said, "I'm not Scancey. He sent the telegrams. I just want to verify them."

I drew them toward me. I fancied she was reluctant to let them go, for rules there are about such things, strictly enforced in larger offices, more lax in easy-going little places. I laughed. "Do you think I look like Wheeler Scancey?" I asked.

She looked up at me with ready cordiality. "Me? No, I don't," she answered. Then she laughed again. "Oh, you!" she added, by which I inferred that she concluded I was joking. I have rarely been farther from it, for I had Wheeler Scancey's telegrams under my fingers turning them over. There were four. One was to a campaign manager in the city putting off an appointment. A

second was to a politician up-state directing a meeting at a small city. The third was an order to a printer. The fourth—as I looked eagerly at it the girl abruptly put out her hands and covered it.

“Say,” she said sharply, “you ain’t doing any verifying.”

I looked up to find a startled expression on her face. She seemed to have read my eagerness.

I turned my hands deliberately and took hold of both of hers. “Is that so, lady?” said I. “Now don’t—please don’t interrupt me. I’m so interested. Look,” I added, transferring both her hands to one of mine and pointing to the fourth message, “you’ve sent that one wrong.”

She looked. Meantime I held her hands. I could feel the grit of office dust upon them and was sorry for the little workaday thing with her “eight to six” and her gullibility on which I played. But I read the telegram and this is what it said:

“FRED HENDERSON, Cold Spring, Chettesworth.

“Chocolate coming up. Spread the plank.

“SCANCEY.”

It was enough. A cipher telegram of course, and the address was all I wanted—all I could get, in fact. I have a good memory when I can visualize a thing, and after the girl’s hands came down again upon the page I could still see Fred Henderson, Cold Spring, Chettesworth, as plainly as before.

The little clerk looked at me reproachfully when I had let go her fingers, and she seemed not a little dismayed, till I carefully consulted my pocketbook again. Then she felt a trifle better.

"Oh," I said, "my mistake. You've got it all right, I guess."

"Did you honestly want to verify?" she asked.

"What makes you so suspicious?" I queried in turn. "Isn't it all right for a man to look over his telegrams after he's sent them?"

"Of course, but——" she began.

"Don't but," said I vivaciously. "It's a terrific habit."

"Oh, I guess you're all right," she said suddenly, laughing and taking the pad of telegrams from the counter. "You ain't a crook, I know that."

"No," said I. "I'm not a crook, Geraldine."

I couldn't feel like one either, despite my duplicity, as I left her with a gallant bow, and laid a straight course for the little railway station.

"How far is it to Chettesworth?" was my question at the agent's brass-barred window.

"Seventy-two miles," came the answer, and it was no gushing maiden now but a square-jawed, not over-joyful looking young chap who seemed more or less resentful of my presence in the place.

"And Cold Spring?" I hazarded, uncertain to what the name might apply.

He scowled. "Well?" he said.

"What is Cold Spring?" I asked.

"It's a horse-farm," he answered, with a look of pain at being parted from so much information at a time.

I like to bait his kind, too, but I had no time. "When can I get a train to Chettesworth?" I pursued.

"At noon—twelve-ten," he grunted.

"Thank you," I said meekly.

It was then eleven and I wandered out to the street again. I had formed no certain plan of action. I had been proceeding on impulse. But I had half made up my mind to take the seventy-mile run to Chettesworth on the chance that that place had been the goal of Judson Bain the night before. If I could find him, I would put the nearest officer after him, to bring him back on my charge against him.

One more thing was in my mind to do, and that I scarcely knew how to accomplish. The suspicion that had leaped into my brain with Cole's story might be wholly absurd, but I had a decided inclination to the theory that the strange actions on the part of Bain and Scancey which the young lawyer had observed might easily be connected with the inability of Barnaby and his agents to find the girl whose name had been involved in the plot against Fenelon. I wished immediately that I had anticipated the need of information about her before I left The Hazels.

There was only one sensible course under the

circumstances, and that was to call up Barnaby again. I disliked to make so much talk over the telephone, but I saw no other way; so I used the wire again, going into a local drug store for the purpose, and was lucky in getting the shrewd lawyer promptly.

"This is Randall again," I said to him. "Does Bain own a horse-farm at Cold Spring, Chettesworth?"

"No," answered Barnaby, "but Curly Conrad does."

This puzzled me for an instant, but I dropped it for the other inquiry. "What is the name of the girl who was mentioned in the letters—the lost letters?" I asked, covering the inquiry as much as I could in apprehension of listeners on the wire.

"Luella Westfall," came his answer quite clear.

"Where can I get information—safely get it—about her?"

He paused a moment. "She lived with her mother on Kent Street," he said. "But—wait—ask the Reverend Mr. Vernon about her. He can tell you all you want to know and he's safe."

"Good," said I. "I'm going up to Chettesworth. I'll send word later."

I hung up the receiver. As I left the booth and stepped out into the store I noticed a clerk behind the counter who looked at me curiously. As I passed on I wondered if he could have overheard my talk through the thin walls of the booth, and how

much he could guess from it if he had. There was no remedy for what was done, however, and I did not look a second time at him. I remembered him as a tall, pale fellow with very light blue eyes, and set him down as a nonentity so far as our affairs were concerned.

Then I called at the house of the Reverend Mr. Vernon, which I learned by inquiry was but a few blocks away, and met that gentleman. He responded to my inquiries readily when I mentioned Barnaby's name.

"Poor child," he said of the girl. "Yes, I have known her and her mother for years. She grew up here. She is a very pretty, frivolous little thing with mostly vanity for a character. Her mother is a very strange woman about whom nobody seems to know much. She and the daughter both worked till recently at an odd trade—painting fish-bait, artificial minnows and the like, for a local firm. They have made a good living. The girl's recent trouble you evidently know about. She was in a city hospital till about a month ago, and her child died there. Martin Fenelon is known to have befriended her and to have paid some at least of her bills. That is what started the stories, I suppose, against Fenelon. I don't believe a word against him, but the girl has been close-mouthed about her trouble. She won't tell anything to help or hurt a soul. Now, I understand, she has run away."

"When?"

"This morning—or last night."

"Alone?"

"So far as we know."

"Does her mother know anything about her?"

"Her mother is the most taciturn person I have ever known. She will not even answer ordinary questions."

"Curious," said I. "It is also strange, isn't it, that the girl should run away now—just at this particular time?"

"Of course. But do you know——" The minister hesitated. He was a kindly old fellow, white of hair, with a good blue eye. "Do you know, I have a feeling that the poor child has been driven away. She showed little or no shame at first over her misfortune. She seemed hardly to understand that it was a shame to her. Then suddenly within the past few days only, since she came home, she has shut herself up at her mother's house, to see no one. And she and her mother have both been absolutely silent to all questions."

I considered. Here, too, lay a curious complication. "You don't know the previous history of the mother?" I asked.

"No. She came here from the West six or eight years ago and she and Lou, as every one called the girl, have lived a workaday life ever since. The girl has been a gay little flirt, running about with all sorts of fellows, but I never thought there was harm in her. She's to be pitied."

I liked the charity of the old fellow. It was easy to see the sort he was—gentle, kind, generous, unjudging.

“Will you describe the girl to me?” I asked. “It is important that we should trace her and I never saw her.”

“She is small,” he answered, “and quite fair. She is pretty—with the pert prettiness of the turned-up-nose sort. She has blue eyes—the baby eyes that seem to appeal so strongly to men. She is always half laughing—or usually. I’ve never seen her very serious. She has a rather long upper lip that suggests the Irish and her eyelashes are long and curl up like a wax doll’s.”

I looked at the man in wonder. Such observation was rare, and such a description of the runaway girl I could hardly have expected to get. I spoke my thoughts. But he only smiled.

“I’ve known the girl a long time, you understand,” he said simply.

I left the old gentleman with a feeling of high respect for him and with quite a different attitude toward the girl in this case. I wondered, with fresh and deeper suspicions of Judson Bain, what widespread trouble he might be sowing in other lives besides those in which I was most deeply concerned. Unscrupulous brute he was.

It was nearing the time of the train for Chettesworth and I had made up my mind to go. I stopped at a restaurant for a sandwich and then went over

to the station again. I sent another telegram to my lawyers in the city advising them that it might be several days before I arrived there, and I laughed as I thought of their probable astonishment over a young man who was so tardy to take possession of so bounteous an inheritance. But I could not concern myself much for my money then. It was mine—and there was no hurry. In twenty-four hours I had found interest in something else that Fortune might give if she chose.

It was an uneventful ride, that seventy-odd miles. It was rather tiresome because of the slow local train I was compelled to take. When I arrived I found Chettesworth a busy place at the foot of the hills that I vaguely knew became quite respectable mountains a little further north in the state. It was a pretty location on that April afternoon, when the sun was bringing out the green things everywhere at a pace that was almost perceptible.

I had left Hazelhurst at noon and it was after three when I stepped down on the station platform. I learned promptly that Cold Spring Farm was six miles back in the country and that I must drive or walk thither, if I would go. I considered this detail with some care, too, for it might be worth my while to preserve the advantage of being as little known to the people of the town as possible. No one but Judson Bain himself would now recognize me on sight. My first object was, indeed, to see him—simply to set my eyes upon him for the purpose of

assuring myself that he was here. Then I could act as circumstances might guide. But I had a feeling that if Bain were here at all he might keep the matter quite dark. Why should he have come up here at all at this time except upon some errand that would not bear publication?

But an idea occurred to me, as I walked up the street of the town, that offered possibilities and at the same time appealed to my love of the adventurous. Why let Judson Bain have opportunity even to learn by chance that I was in the neighborhood? Why not disguise? Why not a deeper game than the simple one I had planned? I jumped at the idea with satisfaction. It would go hard with me if I did not make complications for Judson Bain if I found him at Cold Spring Farm.

My mind worked out the details rapidly. I would first find a place for headquarters—a boarding-house. An inquiry at the station sufficed for that. I was directed to “the best in town” kept by a pleasant-faced German woman who looked clean and who provided me with a room that was good enough. I told her I was going to do some shooting in the hills and would take her room for a week. Then I went out, bought a cheap gun and case, a cheaper grip, and a suit of ready-made corduroys, rough and heavy. I secured from my clothing dealer a canvas shooting-coat and a corduroy cap, too, that were shop-worn and that he was glad to get rid of. I was equally glad to get them, for they

would not look too new. And I lugged all of my new possessions to my lodging.

Two hours later, just as dusk was falling at the end of the balmy spring day, I was asking the barn-boss at Cold Spring Farm—a big, handsome, well-kept place—for a spot in which to sleep for the night. And I got it.

CHAPTER IX

A COMPANION OF LUCK

THERE was a big, old-fashioned house at Cold Spring that loomed huge in the early darkness of the April evening. There was a great cluster of barns and stables, with electric lights at their doors, but with deep dark spaces between and wide dark fields behind them. There were woods within a short distance on two sides. There were a dozen hands who occupied quarters apart from the house, and a red-faced Irish boss who spoke in a rough brogue and was ready with hospitality—for a consideration.

Some of the conditions I liked. I told the boss I was gunning for some special sorts of specimens I hoped to find in the hills—it was scientific gunning, I carefully explained—and that I cared nothing for ordinary game. He regarded me with the indulgent patronage such men usually exhibit for the fellow who betrays the slightest leaning towards a science. What was much more important, however, his attitude gave me freedom of the place for the evening and night and opened opportunity.

I ate supper with the men. To remain as inconspicuous as possible I talked little and listened much.

Fortunately there were three horsemen—buyers or sellers—temporarily at the place, also lodging in the tenant-house to which I had been assigned, so that I was not the only stranger. Moreover, the men of the place had little interest in my affairs. I found opportunity to retire to my room early, therefore—and to get away alone upon my initial undertaking under cover of the night.

It was simple enough to go to the outlying house where I had deposited my gun and pack, to enter my room and lock it. It was a second floor chamber, a fact I regretted. But its window was over a lean-to at the back of the house and faced the open fields. I turned on my incandescent and drew my shade for a time. Then I extinguished the light, and, opening the window, climbed out and down the lower roof and dropped to the ground.

It was still early and no one who was to be house-mate of mine had come to the place. There was the sound of hilarity in the building where I had left the men and there seemed to be perfect quiet over the wide yards. The big house had glowing windows visible at several points, but there was no noise coming from open sashes to indicate that there were guests there.

I circled the house first. I was a bit apprehensive that there might be a dog or two about, but as none awoke at my first round of the place, I let that notion go. I kept out of the range of lights and spied—yes, that's what I was there for—spied at

what I could see. I walked on the soft grass of the lawns—lawns there were immediately about the house. I nearly fell into a little artificial pond back of one wing, but avoided that accident by good luck.

But my early discoveries were practically nothing. It was as I was making my second trip about at closer range with a thought to climb upon the wide dark veranda, and try for a peep at the windows from that vantage ground, that things began to happen. I was just at the very corner of the great front porch, indeed, and was contemplating a vault up to the floor of it when I heard a step and voices of men at a door near at hand, and, before I could calculate chances or think whether or not I was in a safe position, two men came to the rail at the end of the porch almost directly above me and paused together there, smoking and talking.

I could see the glow of their cigars. I could smell the fragrance of fine tobacco. With two steps I could have placed myself where I could have touched their knees between the open spindle-work of the railing. And I had found one thing for which I had been looking—adventure—for the first voice I heard distinctly was unmistakably Judson Bain's.

I stood beside the wide pillar at the corner of the porch. It was pitch dark at the spot and that was why I had chosen it. There were some shreds of vines on a slight trellis close to the pillar and

they were a trifle of protection to me. But either of the two men above could easily have seen me had he been moved to come to the corner and bend over the rail. The space under the porch into which I thought I might creep I instantly found to be latticed. I had no choice but to stand where I was or attract dangerous suspicion by abruptly moving off into the darkness. Besides, I wanted to stay.

They were talking of horses, the two on the porch, at first. What they said is unimportant now. I was not interested in it then. But it was only a moment so, and then came things that stirred me quickly enough to huge excitement.

"How'd the girl act to-night?" asked Bain abruptly in his big hoarse bass.

"Better," answered the other. His voice was even and smooth and he seemed to be a younger man than the other.

"Was she scared?"

"Yes, of course."

"Did you tell her where she is?"

"No."

"Think better not?"

"Yes."

"Humph!" There was anxiety in the tone of the big man. "It was a fool thing to bring her out here."

"No, it wasn't."

"It sure was. She'd have gone anywhere if I'd paid her and told her to git."

"Would she?"

"Yes."

"She might have gone to Barnaby. What would stop her?"

"She'd be afraid of me."

"Did she act afraid of you when she asked for money?"

"No; but I can scare her."

The younger man laughed, a nasty little grunt or two. "Go up and try it now," he responded.

"You don't know me," said Bain.

"I know her."

"Have I got to keep her here?"

"What else can you do? Do you want Barnaby to have a chance at her evidence?"

"I'll buy her up solid."

"That may do—but you'll pay well now."

"Was she hurt?"

"I think not; but it was a rough ride."

A light began to dawn on me. Of course it was obvious of whom they talked. It began to be plain how Luella Westfall had come to Cold Spring.

"Do you think any one could have seen us?" asked Bain.

"Some one might, of course. I don't believe any one did."

"Then what about this telephone message?"

The big man coughed a little at the end of his query and the other paused before replying. I stood marveling at my luck in hearing this much,

and amazed that my instinctive desire to follow Bain had been apparently so well based. My conceit of my own perspicacity began to rise as I listened for the answer to the last question. It came presently.

"Do you know the fellow who 'phoned?"

"Sure."

"Do you know the man he described?"

"No."

"Couldn't be Barnaby?"

"No."

"Nor that fellow, King?"

"No."

"Some detective?"

"Possibly."

"Didn't he give the name at all?"

"No."

"Is there anybody else who has any interest in following you up?"

"Not now."

"What does that mean?"

"Why, that there isn't anybody, of course."

"Oh."

I could have laughed, not at Bain's belief that no one but Barnaby or his agents would have an object in following him, but at the other's attitude toward the man's expression "not now." It was clear enough that both recalled some other occasion when there might have been less certainty.

They were quiet a moment and the sweet smoke

of their cigars drifted down and across to me. Presently Bain spoke again.

"I'll have everybody looking out for suspicious arrivals," he said, and I sobered quickly, with my mind swiftly reviewing what had been said. I had not yet caught the clue, however.

"That's wise," said the other man. "And do you intend to see the girl to-night?"

"I may as well."

They moved away from the rail and loitered along the porch. I wanted to follow and catch every word, but I had heard more than I could have dreamed of hoping for already, and the risk would be too great. What to do with my information was not an easy question to answer, but as I slid off among the trees again, I turned this swiftly in my mind.

The girl Luella Westfall was without doubt in this big house somewhere a prisoner. That seemed clear. I had no means of knowing in what room she was. The man with Bain had used the expression "up" in advising Bain to "go up and try" to frighten her. That indicated second floor at least. In lieu of better to do, I looked up at such second-floor windows as were lighted. They did not promise much.

Bain and his companion were still in the porch. I could see their figures but I could not again approach them. They were standing in the path of light from the open front door now and I could

make out that the smaller man was apparently little more than a boy—rather slight and stooped, and that he had dark and very bushy hair. I could not make out any of his features at the distance. I also stood still, however, in the midst of the almost bare shrubbery, and looked and listened. Presently the two went inside.

What next to do I hardly knew. I wanted to enter the house but I could hardly hope to do that successfully, whatever stratagem I might invent, so long as Bain was in it. I could think of a number of plans I might try upon servants, but the chances of learning much, without being referred to the master of the house, were slender.

I turned to circle the house again, looking once more at the upper windows. I reasoned that any room in which the girl might be imprisoned would have a light, but closed shutters. I looked for such a window. I crept quietly among the trees and bushes, and then out upon the wide lawn again, where it lay quite black under a cloudy, moonless sky. I had no fear that any one even a few feet away would see me and I could prowl to my heart's content. Even if I were discovered here by one of the men I could easily explain my presence by some word about fresh air or a search for drinking water. But I preferred not to be caught at this game.

It seemed rather a fool's quest to look for a window that might hide a prisoner in such a house full

of windows as that. But I was beginning to believe that luck was with me. All sorts of wild schemes which had comparatively little except their audacity to recommend them began to climb up into my brain. I thought of going to one of the back doors of the place and entering, with the purpose of seizing the first opportunity of climbing to the second floor, with no excuse but an inquiry for "Fred Henderson" or "Curly Conrad" ready for glib utterance and depending on sheer assurance to carry me far enough to learn something worth while. I could imagine a startled maid answering questions if I could carry the bluff that I was in the house because of some secret service for Bain himself. I could imagine quick action in deserted hallways if maids to startle proved scarce. I could taste the joy of the excitement of it, for I loved adventure and my physical strength made me less fearful of punishment than I might have been.

I went so far as to choose a door that I might care to try for an entrance and was more than half seriously considering a definite plan when, suddenly, as if luck were determined to be my companion for the night, that very portal opened and a man came out and stood on the step. I was on the lawn probably fifty feet from where he stood, with the dark background of the trees behind me. He stood on the steps, with a faint reflected light from some inner room in the hall at his back.

As he paused, too, a second figure appeared and

stood beside him. Then he spoke and I knew him for Bain again.

"I'll be cautious," he said loudly enough for me to hear across the little space in the quiet of the night.

"Of course. Don't spend much time over it either," said the other, who was unmistakably the same man who had been in the porch with him.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," said Bain.

He stepped down and I heard his foot scuff on the gravel. Quite ignorant of what might now be in the wind, I waited to see what direction he would take. He started toward the barns. I was doubtful whether I ought to follow him or whether this very opportunity was made for my entrance to the house, when the man at the door called after him a sentence that decided me.

"Don't you think you'd better have a light?" he asked with a half-guarded tone but loud enough to have been heard to the stables.

"No," answered Bain, "I know the path up there as well as I know the walk to the gate."

The thing roused a new curiosity in me. I wavered as to the wisest course, and then on impulse born of seeing my enemy and Hal's disappearing in the darkness alone, I followed him. I ran over the grass lightly. He kept to a gravel path that led to the big drive before the main horse-barn. There he turned and passed the front of the dark building and rounded its corner. He plunged

into absolute blackness here, but I followed, circling off to the right alongside a low tool-house to keep from getting the lights of house or yard behind me. I was guided by the sound of his steps after we entered the space between the buildings and followed as lightly as I could. Once he stopped and I was certain he had heard me, till I caught the click of a gate latch and knew he was letting himself out of the yard.

I pressed on hastily then, found the gate and passed it without noise. I discovered his figure again on a rise of ground, dimly visible against the dull sky. Then I stumbled into a well-worn path that he was evidently following and my way became easier. I followed him as closely as I dared, and soon became certain that he was making his way up toward the nearer hills. It was interesting work. What could be his purpose I could not guess, but I had a mind to give him a trick out there in the darkness that might make him think, and I strove to formulate a plan as I crept on behind him. Only occasionally could I see him at all, and then very indistinctly. But I could keep track of him easily because of the constantly repeated little throaty cough he emitted—a smoker's cough. I was grateful, too, to whatever star was mine at the moment for that.

The path led through a meadow, then along the side of a noisy little brook, across a small bridge and up a steeper bank on the farther side. Then we

came to a stiff ascent and I had difficulty in following without sounds, for the gravel rolled noisily from under foot at each step. The noise he himself made, however, seemed to cover mine when I could not keep to the sod. But when we reached the more level ground above, I had the satisfaction of seeing the broad, dark back of my man plodding steadily on without the least appearance of alarm. Why should he be alarmed, indeed, on his friend's land with no thought of an enemy at hand? I laughed in my soul at the idea that he was himself guiding me to some unsuspected secret of his that might give me a hold upon him under which he would be forced to close his fight against my friends.

We came to a little thicket of woods after passing the field about the stream. There I entered after him more cautiously again, but still eager, and followed by sound once more. He walked but a few steps, however, in the deep shadow under the trees before he stopped. I had pressed more closely upon him here than I had meant and I was very near indeed—scarcely a dozen feet back upon his path—when the abrupt cessation of his footsteps warned me to stop. And in a moment the absolute silence of the whole countryside seemed to flood in over us like water that quenches live coals.

If I had not known Judson Bain was there in the darkness ahead of me I would not have thought a human being could be within miles, perhaps, so

quiet was it. Imagine, then, how I started when the man's heavy voice suddenly boomed out of the silence and the gloom.

"Well?" he said.

I ceased to breathe, I think. It was not so much that I feared him. I was more than a match for him physically, unless he was armed; but the surprise of it was huge. He seemed to have discovered suddenly that some one was on his trail and was turning to bay. Still, I could not believe that he had heard me now when he had failed to discover me on the hillside. I stood still. And then almost immediately he spoke again and I discovered that his words were not for me.

"Are you ready to be sensible?" he asked.

I was nonplussed for a moment. But presently the light of understanding began to dawn upon me.

"I've come to talk to you," the man went on. "Are you tired of being shut up here?"

I could hear no answer of any kind whatever to his queries. I wondered what sort of place we had come to. A moment later, however, I heard the sound of a lock or a bolt in a wooden door—one of the unmistakable sounds of life, like the creak of a shoe or a clink of china. I had a swift mental vision of a house here in the woods and instantly I knew to my own complete satisfaction who must be the person who was expected to be "tired of being shut up here." Here, then, was the real meaning of the phrase I had construed to indicate a

prison in a second floor room at the big house. It was a prison in a house or a hut on the wooded hill-side—as lonely a spot as could have been picked within ready reach of Cold Spring.

I waited. I heard the creak of heavy hinges, then the hasty scratching of a match. And then a yellow light flared up and I saw Bain's fat face and pudgy hands illumined in it.

He stepped forward immediately into the interior of what seemed to be a small log-house. The door, I had time to see, was a stout oaken one with an outside wooden bar and a heavy iron bolt upon it. The man closed it, however, almost immediately, himself inside, and the gloom was as great about me as before.

I stepped cautiously forward listening. I trod with utmost care only in the well-worn path, setting each foot down with extreme deliberation. No sound came immediately from the hut and I feared I was missing something of value. But when I reached a spot some six feet from the door I heard the man's voice again and saw a fresh light through the chinks about the door.

"Are you ready to be sensible?" was what he asked again.

There was no reply.

"Better talk up and do what I want you to. You won't regret it."

Silence.

"Come, come! Don't be a fool."

Absolute lack of reply or sound of any sort. I marveled at the stamina of this girl who dared give back such treatment to the man who was her captor, after an experience of being shut up out here, even for a brief time after nightfall.

"You're an obstinate little devil, aren't you?" said Bain. Then as no reply came to this he began suddenly to laugh. "You know what you are?" he asked. "You're a plain common fool. Don't want money? Don't want freedom, eh? Want to sleep out here and go hungry? How do you like the spooks of the woods for company? Wouldn't you like a mattress to bunk on? Or some drinking water?"

He paused again, but his words elicited no more response than before. My blood was growing hot again at the mean cruelty of the man. The idea of such treatment as this accorded to any woman, whoever or whatever she might be, in a civilized land, was amazing; but it was also maddening to a fellow who would somewhat rather take up a quarrel with the jailer than not. But I had caution to think of also, and I began to dictate to myself that punishment for Bain would wait. It was information I wanted now.

But the man appeared to become disgusted with the stubborn silence of his captive. He said as much in a coarse sentence. His words warned me, too, that his visit in the house was at an end and I had just time to leap aside upon the grass, when he

opened the door and his light went out. Out he came again, as I knew by the sounds, and presently he had barred and bolted the door and was off down the path once more.

I stood quite still. If my ears and my guiding star had not played me false I had fallen into the most extraordinary good fortune, for the very person who might do Hal's cause most good seemed to be actually in my hands. I waited while Bain's footsteps died away down the path. My fingers itched to be upon that bolt and bar. And when at last I felt that a move was safe I turned eagerly to the door. I spoke aloud quickly to warn the prisoner that a friend and not a foe now was her visitor.

"Don't be afraid," I said. "I'm a friend. I've come to let you out—to get you away from Bain. I can help you escape and you can help me. It's a shame and an outrage that you have been kept out here, but you'll have your chance to get even with Judson Bain."

I was undoing the fastenings of the door swiftly as I spoke. I waited for no answer. I wanted none. I only hoped the frightened girl inside would be quietly acquiescent in my scheme for carrying her off.

I pushed open the door and felt for a match in my waistcoat pocket. I reduced my voice to a whisper and crossed the threshold, scratching for a light on the damp timbers at my side. And then, suddenly, without a sign of warning something

heavy and cruel and crushing came smashing down upon me, striking me a terrific blow upon the back of my head and neck, and sending me staggering forward to fall, blinded and stunned, into a mass of vile refuse upon the floor, a million lights dancing before my eyes while the light of sense and reason ebbed out.

CHAPTER X

NOT ALWAYS TO THE BOLD

HAVE you ever heard a bird sing in the night? When I came back to consciousness or to the borderland of it, my first sensation was that some little feathered fellow was twittering away for dear life near at hand. The impression was that it was real—that it was the first part of the real world that my waking senses took hold of after a sleep of some duration. When I became fully awake to feeling and memory, however, the bird song was lost.

It was absolutely dark about me. There was not so much as a thread of light anywhere visible. As for sound, I am sure that if one were shut up in a vault, it could not seem more silent. My own deep breath as I rolled over on my side and sat up echoed dully in the space of the room in which I lay.

I had not much sensation of giddiness. A little there was. But there was plenty of pain in my head and neck and the sting of broken skin. But I knew I was not greatly hurt because of the freedom from deeper feeling of sickness. As recollection of what had happened came back my first impulse was to speak to the girl who, I supposed, must be somewhere here with me.

"Hello there!" I ventured.

There was no reply. Surely she must be frightened half out of her wits.

"Hello!" I repeated. "I'm a prisoner, too, it seems."

Perfect silence. I held my own breath now to listen for a sound of any stir. There was none.

"Don't be afraid," I persisted. "I came here as a friend. Bain seems to have gotten the better of me, too," I added with sudden rueful review of my actions. How easy it is to see, in retrospect, wherein we have been fools—when we have met failure or defeat. I could not but be sure that I had been cleverly tricked, indeed. Here I was with a broken head, a prisoner, when I had believed myself at the top of an amazing wave of luck—too amazing to be true, I told myself, as I sat considering.

But I have no patience with grief over a lost trick. I am ready to see when I've played my cards wrong, but I want to play the next hand and not cry over the last. That is why I do not always get from meditation just what profit might be extracted, I suppose. It is also why I sometimes secure an advantage. On the gridiron at college we were coached to line up fast after a play, however much it may have gone against us, and to put another over as quickly as possible—to play the other fellow off his feet. It's not a bad method in any sort of game.

I lighted a match. The first thing I saw was a

hand well covered with my own blood. Then as the little stick flamed up I saw the interior of a log-hut some twelve feet square. On its floor was nothing but stable refuse. On its walls there was nothing at all. The ceiling was the under side of a heavy board roof. There was no window. There was but one door—the heavy oak affair I had seen first by the light of Judson Bain's match—and it was tight shut, evidently locked now. In one corner was a pile of straw. On it lay a horse-blanket. There seemed to be something under the blanket.

I rose to my feet. I let my match go out and stretched cautiously, putting my hands up against the roof, which I could just reach. Then I struck a second match and moved slowly across the floor. If any one were in the place at all it must be under that blanket. There was no other hiding-place. I held my match guarded by my hand and stooped over the bed-like pile. Then I lifted the corner of the blanket carefully.

I suppose every one has had the experience of climbing stairs in the dark and has calculated on one more step after reaching the top, putting the foot out and down with expectation of finding a final stair but coming down with that peculiarly flat jolt of disappointment. I can think of no other sensation to which to compare my own feeling when I found no little human head there on that pallet. I had believed so absolutely that just one person was there, and that person a girl whose whereabouts

I would be glad indeed to discover, that I could not believe the evidence of my eyes in the match-light when what appeared to be merely a bunch of loose cloth was discovered under the blanket. The revelation was as complete a turn-over of confident expectation as I ever expect to experience. I simply could not believe it.

I even paused to turn about and look again around the silent hut. I drew the blanket on down and off the straw with slow caution, half expecting still that I should uncover a little cringing form. But no such form was there, and the certainty slowly forced itself upon me that I had been duped and fooled beyond belief. Tricked, of course, and trapped, I knew I had been. But that talk of Bain here in this hut! Had it been addressed to empty air? Had he known I followed him? How far back then had he known of my movements? Who had struck me down? How much preparation had there been for this trick upon me? How much did they know of my purpose and aim in this place? How much of what I thought I had learned, besides the misguiding words that had hoodwinked me here, was also false?

I dropped my second match and put my foot upon it. Then I stood still in the darkness fairly awed by the thing. I cannot say I was frightened. I was puzzled—and humiliated—yes, shamed to the center of my self-conceit. I felt the very blush of it heat my face and neck as I thought of the enormous folly

of which I had been guilty, and then a great qualm of apprehension as I realized the cleverness of the game that had been put up on me and the possibilities for tricks upon my friends made feasible by my blunder.

Of course, brute force to fight trickery suggests itself to a chap of big muscles when he has been cleverly tripped. The impulse to seize and crush and break and kill something rushed upon me. Of course, too, it was my hurt pride that prompted me. But I felt that I must have action, and some sort of violence would be the least that would satisfy me. The oaken door offered an object upon which I might at least expend a part of my rising head of steam and I could not even wait to look for any sort of tool or weapon, but leaped to it and tore at it with my hands.

Naturally it resisted my foolish efforts. It was as tight in its place as a drumhead and solid enough to defy a dozen bare-handed men like me. It brought me to a pause very promptly and I turned away and back to the center of the hut with some chagrin at the futile effort.

I lighted another match then and returned to the straw pile in the corner. Mere curiosity suggested a turning over of the articles of clothing there and I stopped to shake them out. In that moment another astonishing revelation came to me. No sooner did I touch the stuff than I was struck by a curious sense of familiarity in the appearance of the things,

and, as I picked up a man's coat and let it unroll in loose folds in my hand, I knew it suddenly for my own—my coat that I had packed in my hunter's pack and had left with my gun at the tenant-house down in Cold Spring farmyard, not two hours ago.

And the other things were all there. There was my vest and some other extra clothing, of which I had made up a bundle that I might not appear to be traveling without luggage though I had not expected to use any of these things at Cold Spring. My pack had been ruthlessly torn open evidently and the contents had been brought here—in anticipation of my coming. Of course the gun was not there nor anything that could be considered a weapon and the reason for opening my pack was clear in this.

The meaning of my imprisonment here was not far to seek. If Bain knew enough of me to recognize in me an enemy, he knew enough to want to keep me—perhaps even to plan some rich revenge upon me now—for the upset I had given him in our first encounter. If he really knew who I was, how he must now be gloating over me, I thought; and I began myself to see some of the humorous features of my discomfiture. But a much more interesting task was an attempt to construct if possible the chain of occurrences that had led to this unlucky turn.

My mind naturally went back to the incident of

the telephone and I remembered the pale-faced drug clerk. He might have overheard my talk with Barnaby or enough of it to give him a clue to my quest. If he had been friendly with Bain it would be natural for him to send a warning to Cold Spring—perhaps. I was not in a mood to be cock-sure of my own theories. Granting this, however, or that information had early reached Bain that some one was coming to Cold Spring Farm, and that some one in search of Luella Westfall, the rest was explainable. I let my light die out and sat down on the straw to consider it all. It would have been simple, for instance, for Bain himself to get a look at me while I sat unconscious of suspicion at the foreman's table. It would have been easy to have me carefully watched and followed. I could hardly believe that the conversation to which I had listened in the porch had been invented for my benefit, however, for it seemed too natural to be the product of an artificial situation. But I was not certain of that even. Somewhere the tricking began—somewhere between the time I had left my room in the tenant cottage and had slid down the lean-to roof and the moment when the blow had been struck at me from behind when I stood in the doorway of the log-hut where I now was. Just where I had begun to follow other leading than my own initiative I could not guess.

As for my present situation I seemed to be in for a night's stay in my prison at least. Since I had

come back to consciousness I had heard no sound to indicate that any person was in my vicinity. I might or I might not be guarded. I was quite effectually imprisoned. Perhaps Bain would conclude, quite naturally, that a fellow who could be so easily duped into a trap could be safely trusted not to escape from so stout a little box as this.

I did some earnest thinking. A conclusion rather more impressive than welcome was that the game is not always to the bold. That is one of the fallacies that is preached at youth in many ways in these days. The game is to the bold, only when he is also wise.

Whether it was this sort of cogitation that put me into a state of somnolence I cannot say. The somewhat surprising truth is, however, that I went to sleep after a period of it. Perhaps the loss of a quantity of blood from the wound in my neck had to do with it. At any rate I slept—heavily. And when I woke there was light at the chinks around the door—seen from within this time—and birds were twittering in earnest, and it was day.

It was as quiet, except for the wood-noises, as it had been in the night, however. Apparently no one was near, or had come near the place, since I had been locked into it. Whatever the intention of my enemy regarding me—if he had one—he had apparently slept upon the situation. So had I. He had no advantage of me in that. Moreover, I felt better.

No headache; my neck was very sore but the blood was dry now and so I concluded that the worst of the injury was over. My condition was good and I readily recovered from most hurts. That was a reason for fearing them comparatively little, I suppose. My principal physical sensation on waking was one of thirst.

A little light came into the interior of the hut. There was enough by which to verify the impressions I had obtained by match-light. I got up and poked about the walls and door again in the dimness, seeking without expectation for something I might have overlooked. I found nothing that was worth consideration. I discovered that I could see out between the edge of the door and its casing and could clearly define the lines of the bolt and bar across that exceedingly narrow opening, and this suggested the use of a pocket-knife to cut away the edge of the plank till I could touch, and possibly manipulate, those fastenings. But as my pocket-knife was a silver-handled affair whose largest blade was two inches long, and, as the plank was of two-inch oak, I decided against such an attempt. I might succeed in cutting a way to the bolts in the course of a couple of days or so, but I am not of the temper to wax enthusiastic over such a prospect.

But patience was absolutely the only quality that was worth cultivating that morning. My watch informed me—that I had neglected to wind it the night before—so I had to guess at the time. The

sunlight found its way through a crack in the wall at one side of the room and I watched it creep across the place, looking in the dust through which it shone like a long gilded wizard-brush, stretched out to paint a streak across the straw and litter on the floor. Only no streak was left behind. The pigment magically followed the magic brush—about as ink will follow a pen with which one strives to write on oiled paper. And I guessed that it was sunrise, and eight o'clock and nine and ten and noon in slow, slow succession.

It grew unpleasant, that little stuffy, tight place. I have no superlatives to apply to it now, for if I yielded to the superlative impulse I might say something objectionable. But from sunrise to noon in April is quite a stretch. I had plenty of time to think, to grow more thirsty, to think and to grow more thirsty. Then I had time to grow deeply wroth and more wroth—and to begin really to feel distress for water. Still the silent minutes and half minutes and seconds and half seconds dragged away! I had time to go over every one of the swift events of my wonderful yesterday, which had been as full of amazingly rapid action as to-day was of silence and enforced rest. I had time to think of what a contrast my situation and all my desires and wishes to-day presented to my aims and plans of two days back. I had time to think of the fortune waiting for me in the city toward which I had been hastening and of the strange event that

had turned me from my eagerness to possess it. I had time to think of a brave girl, of whose very existence I had not dreamed when I began my journey but for whom I was now willing—yes, even glad—to be at war with a dangerous enemy—if only I had not been such a consummate fool as to estimate him at so low a figure.

CHAPTER XI

NOR TO THE PATIENT

I HAD time to think all the thoughts that might naturally come. Why rehearse them? And when I heard footsteps on the path outside—after my magic brush had painted and picked up its magic streak more than halfway across my prison—I was ready to welcome my clever enemy himself, for very company's sake. And he had come.

“Are you ready to be sensible?”

Think of it. That was the question he put to me through the door of that hut when he stood by the barred oak. I laugh as I think of it now. He was a joker—Judson Bain—a joker.

“Yes,” I answered as promptly as I ever replied in my life to a question.

“Will you be quiet?”

“Of course.”

“I have a man with me with a gun! He won't hesitate to shoot,” he warned me.

I looked out through a crack low in the wall. I could see the legs of two of them.

“You won't need your gun,” I answered.

The wooden bar was raised and the bolt pushed back. The door opened a bit and the fat face of

my captor-in-chief looked in. He grinned when he saw me seated on my straw. He motioned to the man behind him to come up, and himself stepped inside. I was relieved and thankful to see that he had brought a basket with him and better still a big bottle of water. I stirred promptly to get up, for the thirst was burning my throat.

"Sit still," commanded Bain promptly. "Jack," he added to the man with him, "if he moves fill him full of bird-shot."

The other man stood in the doorway. I looked at him in silent astonishment. He was my Irish friend of the evening supper, the barn-boss. In his hands he held a shotgun—my own little cheap gun—and both hammers of the thing were drawn back, as evidently ready for business as if they had expected me to leap upon them. The implication might be considered flattering. I did not dwell upon it, however.

"How have you slept?" asked Bain facetiously.

"Well, thank you," I answered him, and I chalked the count against him on my mental record for an accounting to come.

"Hmph!" he remarked. "Well, I have no mind to starve you to death. Here's some food."

This sounded too decent to be consistent. I did not venture an answer.

"Now," said he, "if you'll tell me who you are and why you are spying on me—why you came to attack me in my office and followed me up here—

we may get to some basis for an understanding. When a man is my enemy I like to know why."

It was a curious attempt at bluff, hearty, courageous talk; I sounded the shallowness of it but I answered him freely enough. I was impressed that I held one advantage in having once played the fool for him. He would look for the like from me again perhaps.

"Why didn't you ask me a fair question like that in the first place?" I asked.

"Why should you come here, a stranger, and take part in a fight with which you had nothing to do?" he responded.

"I started no fight with you," I answered.

"You came as young Philbric's emissary," he growled.

"I never heard of Philbric till you mentioned him," I told him.

He stared. "Of course that's a lie," he said.

"It was just such a remark as that which started our trouble yesterday," said I.

"Well, there won't be any trouble to-day."

"No—not while you have your man and your gun at hand."

"Who are you?" he asked.

"You had my card."

"Yes. Your name is Randall. What are you?"

"I'm a young man who had not the slightest hostility to you yesterday morning, Judson Bain," I answered.

"What brought you to my office with that note?" He looked at me with puzzlement clear in his eyes.

"The chance request of a lady," said I, willing to show him his own unwisdom now.

"Oh—Donna Philbric?"

"Miss Philbric."

"She sent you?"

"She asked me to deliver that note to you."

"Well?"

"Well, the answer is up to you."

"I thought——" He hesitated.

"You jumped to the conclusion that I was an enemy."

He scowled at me. "Why did you come up here?"

"To find you."

"Why, I say?"

"That's the answer."

"No; but what do you want—now you've found me?"

"I came because I hadn't much faith in the town marshal. I've started suit against you for assault."

He gave a short laugh. "You have, eh?"

"I have."

"And your witnesses?"

"I shall have little trouble making out a case," said I.

He paused again. "But that wasn't what brought you here," he asserted.

"All right," said I. "What did?"

"Why did you sneak a look at Scancey's telegrams?"

I suppose I started at that, for he immediately laughed again. But I answered that readily, too.

"To trace you," I said.

"How did you know I had left town?"

"You were seen to go."

It was his turn to start now. He did, and he glanced hastily at the barn-boss, who was listening with avid interest.

"Did you see me?"

"No—oh, no," answered I, and laughed in my turn, too.

"Why did you come, then?"

"I told you."

I saw that he did not dare to ask me the question to which he really wanted an answer, at least in the presence of his man. I was willing, therefore, to play with his dilemma.

"Go ahead," I said, "ask me the thing you want to."

He looked again at the Irishman. "I want to know your reasons for coming up here," was the answer he made, however.

"I came, Mr. Bain, because I knew you were here. If I had not been careless you would not have caught me here. You know what I came to seek. The person who told you I was coming could not know that fact without knowing my quest. Now you understand?"

He began to lose his temper. "You're a fool!" he exclaimed.

"Oh," said I, "I know that. I'm a lot bigger fool now than I shall be again immediately."

"You are going to stay here for awhile," he threatened.

"Very likely," I answered.

"You'll stay here till you are ready to tell me the truth about who you are and why you are my enemy."

"Or," I amended, "till my friends come after me."

"Your friends?"

"Yes. They know quite well where I am."

"Do they?" He laughed again more easily. "They may think you are at Cold Spring."

I did not reply to that. It was true that my friends might have difficulty in finding me if I were confined here long enough to arouse their suspicions. But my friends were of very new making and they had troubles of their own—quite as vital as mine. What would be their attitude toward me if they failed to hear from me for a day or two and if their own difficulties pressed hard? The reflection was not reassuring, and Bain, who watched me shrewdly while I went over my case, suddenly laughed again at his reading of my face.

"I guess that would be a good one to leave you to think about," he said.

I had no reply for this either. I had no choice

with that shotgun staring my way but to take what he said. But I understood now more of what he intended, more of his power and of its limitations; also, curious as it may seem, my thirst was sufficient at that moment to cause me only impatience that he should be gone, so that I might be at that bottle of water—even at the price of prolonged imprisonment.

“Well,” he said, grinning, “I think we’ll try it. I’ll come again later and see how you do. Perhaps you’ll have arrived at some decision.”

He and his man went out. They closed the door and barred it. No sooner were their footsteps in the path than that water bottle was at my lips, and I think I never tasted drink that was equal to its contents. I think I drank a quart. And I felt enough better for it to be entirely cheerful over my own prospects.

My only worry, indeed, most of the time, was about affairs at The Hazels. I could but guess what might be going on there to-day. I hoped that Bain’s absence would have the effect of delaying matters in the case against Hal and that I might yet manage an escape to be of use to him and to Donna. I should have enough against Judson Bain now when I should be at liberty to make things hot for him. Naturally he also knew that and he would protect himself if he could. How far he would go in dealing with me I could not foresee. I felt quite certain that he would use as rigorous measures as he

dared. If he were convinced that my friends could not find me he might not hesitate to keep me here for a protracted period. I might have difficulty, indeed, in proving anything against him afterwards. He was of the sort to dare just that kind of thing if hard-pressed, and I believed my following the trail of the girl to Cold Spring had pressed him hard indeed.

I ate some of the luncheon I found in the basket. It was bread and meat mainly, with a bottle of salt and one of pepper for seasoning. It was just such a combination as a man who was unused to such a task would be likely to throw together. It argued to my mind that few of the household at the farm were in the secret of my capture. I was hungry enough to relish the fare, however, and did full justice to it. When I had finished I sat again upon my cot and fell to studying my case.

The prospect was that I would have some hours now to wait again before I should receive another visit from Bain. Whether he would come that afternoon or the following morning I had no means of judging. If he chose to wait twenty-four hours I was helpless to hurry him. What I desired to do—must do now—was to plan a stratagem to try upon him when he should come. It was to this, then, that I bent my mind as I lay back in the place where I had spent the night and the morning and watched my sunbeam go on its way across the floor. And I thought to good purpose.

I began by a systematic consideration of means at hand, an inventory of the contents of the hut, indeed, with which I might put up a fight or a surprise against the odds that would oppose me. It did not seem hopeful at first, but necessity will always mother some sort of invention if it is really necessity—and I was convinced mine was real. I spent some hours even finding a clue to a scheme upon which to work, so I cannot claim that the game I attempted was an inspiration. But I did evolve a plan. And I put it into effect, too.

The long afternoon dragged away. It was dull enough for the most part, but toward its close when I got my idea and when I began to hope for an early opportunity to try its efficacy I also began to find plenty of interest and amusement in it. Indeed, I recollect distinctly a laugh or two in which I indulged, in the earnest hope I commenced to entertain that success might perch upon my banners, as it were. If success refused to perch it is true there was an excellent chance that I might find a charge or two of bird-shot as the reward of my pains. That had its serious side certainly. But I meant to have my try and to put up a fight at any rate.

I had made some preparations. One thing I had done was to roll upon my lead pencil the paper that had covered my luncheon in the basket, making a tube thereof. I had fastened the outer layer by slitting the sheet with my knife and pulling a tongue of the next layer through as I have seen letters

fastened together in business offices. It made a neat tube about two feet long like a boy's putty-blower, and that was my weapon. I had selected my ammunition also? Indeed, it had been the ammunition with which my idea had started. And I had a plan rather carefully sketched out for using it.

As the afternoon light dwindled to twilight, however, and then to velvet darkness again my hope began to dwindle somewhat. I began to fear that Bain intended to give me a longer time to think over my position than I could possibly desire or that he had made up his mind to the radical course of simply keeping me shut up till he was ready to liberate me and let me go and do as I liked. It was a rather helpless position in which I was placed if he chose to do that. But just as I had almost lost expectation of seeing him again that night I heard his now welcome voice in the thicket outside and knew that the test of my stratagem was at hand. And I rose to the play with a sort of fierce joy in it upon me that made me feel ready to strike hard blows indeed if the opportunity offered.

CHAPTER XII

SOMETIMES TO THE WISE

THE door of the hut opened inward. When Bain and his red-faced barn-boss had come in the morning the former had unbarred the door and peered in while his aid stood outside with the gun in readiness in case the prisoner should prove obstreperous. I hoped that some such order might prevail to-night, though I cared little which of the two I dealt with first.

When I heard them coming I was like a boy with a Hallowe'en trick to perpetrate. It was a rather pleasurable sensation, after nearly twenty-four hours of inactivity and confinement, to have something definite to do and to be planning a fight. And when the steps of the men on the path outside became plainly audible I stood in my corner by the straw ready to begin my end of the program.

I was somewhat taken aback when I discovered that, instead of the ordinary lantern light I had half expected them to bring, they appeared to have an electric torch. The ray of it was easily recognizable as it played on the ground and about the hut at their approach. This fact embarrassed me, for I hoped for equal advantages of light at least between

us. But I swiftly decided that my plan was good enough to try even with this added handicap against me and I held to my resolution.

Bain came up to the door exactly as he had earlier.

"Hello there!" he saluted me.

"I'm here," said I from the corner of the straw, striving to put the sound of weariness and depression into my voice. There was a snicker at my response and I suppose that from their standpoint it did sound amusing.

"Have you a match?" asked Bain.

"Yes," said I.

"Light it," he commanded.

I had a serious objection to compliance, not because the light would betray my scheme but because both hands were fully occupied. I hesitated.

"Well?" said my captor inquiringly.

"I thought I had another," I answered on the spur of the moment.

Bain laughed. "Don't like the dark, eh?" he inquired.

"I've been trying to dispel some of it," I answered, impatient for my opportunity.

"Well," said the man at the door, "you sit still where you are. If you are on your feet when I open the door we'll shoot."

"Do you think I'm a fool?" I asked.

I heard him begin unfastening the bars. I stepped softly forward in the darkness. Next moment the

door swung inward and instantly the electric torch ray swept the interior in a circle rounding toward the straw cot. Above it I saw the shadow of a head against the light outside, and back of that the barrels of the gun, with a reflected glint in them that advised me of their closeness.

I put my little paper tube to my lips and aimed it at the face that was turning toward me. And then as the glare came close I blew viciously upon the thing and sent my welcome home.

If the surprise were not as complete as mine the night before it was good enough. The light went out with instant relaxation of the hand that held it and I knew I had hit my mark. There was a wild curse and gasp and then a hoarse shriek of pain, and the dark blockade in the doorway fell back and away. Doubling down to as low a posture as I dared to take I made a dive through the opening, clubbing the heavy water bottle as my remaining weapon. I saw a figure turning and writhing on the path and another upright and poised against a gray patch of starlit sky. I threw my bottle instantly at the latter and heard a grunt as it struck, thanks be, and then I plunged into the bushes out of gunshot, with the open fields before me and only the cries of the wounded on the battle-ground behind. And laughter nearly undid me as I actually paused to listen in the gloom of a sweet-smelling meadow to the bellows of the man I had effectually incapacitated for one time. For Judson Bain

would not see again that night by torch-light or otherwise. My ammunition for my blow-gun had been a good-sized ounce of cayenne pepper.

The running was good across that field. I remembered directions sufficiently well to point my way toward the stream, and when I reached the bluff and scrambled down and splashed my way through water that came up to my hips and was cold, the shape of the valley itself guided me back within sight of the lights at the farm. After that my problem was rather to think of appearances than to find my way.

I knew that my head and neck and hands must still be covered with blood that had dried upon them and which I had had no opportunity to remove. This, with my water-saturated trousers and boots, must have made of me an object that would have little resemblance to a civilized being should I appear to an unexpectant person in a light. My first task must be to get a clean up if possible and the prospect did not seem good. It was a serious difficulty, too, for there was no chance to avoid close observance if any one caught sight of me in this condition. I was six miles from the town, where I would be safe enough with whatever story of explanation I cared to give. On Conrad's farm or even in Bain's neighborhood I could not safely guess at friend and foe.

But I could not hesitate and the recollection that I had not yet accomplished all that I had come for

drove me suddenly to audacious enterprise. As I ran down the path that led to the farmyard I reflected that it was quite probable not more than one or two people on the place knew of my imprisonment. The one place where Bain and his farm-boss would think last of looking for me, if they thought it worth while now to look at all, would be on the farm. It was late enough so that most of the hands would be off duty and either in town or at the tenant-houses. I made up my mind to try for a clean up at the very house to which I had been assigned the night before.

As I passed the gate into the yard proper, therefore, I slowed my pace to a rapid walk, crossed past the big horse-barn and the men's dining-rooms and so to the house where I had had a room. There were no lights here and the door was not locked. I went in without hesitation and ran up the stairs. I found the door of my room at the end of the upper hall, entered and turned on the light. The shade was up and I drew it, and then without pause I poured water into the bowl and plunged into such ablutions as I could perform with utmost haste.

One can do much in five minutes. I calculated that I would have so much leeway. I took it, scrubbed away the signs of my adventures, bound a handkerchief about my neck and let it lie over my ruined collar, combed my hair with a bone comb from the small washstand and saw by the mirror that I had made at least a reasonable success of

the whole undertaking. I took off my coat and made a scrub at the collar of it with a wet towel, getting most of the stains off the corduroy, too, with the cold water. Then I put on the coat again and shut off my light. As I did so I heard noisy cries and shoutings in the yard.

I ran down the stairs and out. Several people were rushing about and all were centering upon a group coming up the path. I could guess who made a nucleus for the little bunch of people, but I did not pause to inquire. I wanted a hat and the moment seemed a possible one to get the article. I ran around the house by the way with which I had become acquainted the night before and up to the broad front steps. A man was smoking in front of the open front doors. Inside I saw, where I had seen it the previous evening, a rack hung with coats and hats.

I ran up the steps. "Quick!" I gasped to the fellow there. "Bain's hurt and they're hard after us. Where's the girl!"

I caught his arm. As I did so I saw that he was my bushy-haired acquaintance of the night before. It flashed upon me that he might even be the man Conrad, who was called by the suggestive title of Curly. I took the chance. He was a little chap anyhow and I could throw him over my head if need be.

"Quick, Conrad!" I insisted. "They're gunning for us."

His eyes opened like a frightened child's but he held back.

"Who—who are you?" he gasped.

"I'm the fellow that telephoned," I answered, and swung him around to the light so that my back might be toward it. "Scancey sent me!"

Suddenly he started under my grasp, for a loud shout rang through the yards.

"All hands out! Help! Burglars! Thieves! Fire!" That was the cry. It echoed over the lawn and among the buildings and startled the quiet night into an uproar.

"There!" I cried aloud. "Now, quick! Where is she?"

The little man backed weakly against the door. "She's gone!" he answered. "They won't find her. Tell Scancey they took her up to Hart—to Old Drom!"

CHAPTER XIII

SHAKEN CONFIDENCE

I DROPPED him. I had no time to go for a cap now. I had time only to run out into the darkness again with a yell of fire on my lips to add a touch of realism to my going, for his benefit, though he looked too nearly palsied to notice me. And in a moment more I was in the road running with all the power of a pair of fairly nimble legs for the village.

No one stopped me. I went straight in to Chettesworth in fairly rapid time. I found a quiet town with no alarm abroad. Indeed, it was getting late at that time and all really good citizens seemed to be in bed. I felt rather guilty even to rouse my good German landlady and give her my week's rent, but I had no further use for her room now and I learned at the station that a train would leave at midnight that would take me back to Hazelhurst.

I was still hatless and was without gun and pack, but I told my landlady I had gotten into deep water up among the hills and lost them all, and promptly she brought me a soft hat from somewhere among her possessions that was not a bad fit, though it did not serve to make my appearance more reputable.

Still, I was glad to have it, for a hatless man is a conspicuous object, especially at night.

I sat on the station platform till the train came, expecting still that an alarm would come in from Cold Spring Farm. But none arrived before my train, and my departure was disgustingly peaceful. At three o'clock in the morning I was again in the quiet streets of Hazelhurst, on the very corner, indeed, where only sixty hours before I had flung my ball of snow at the wooden image. Just sixty-two hours ago! It seemed far, far back in the past.

I got into the hotel, but no one, proprietor, clerk or servant, was about. So I sat in a chair by a cold radiator till daylight, reading yesterday's black headlines in the papers, accounts of the Philbric case which told nothing new, dozing and shivering a bit but not utterly wretched. After that I got breakfast and a room and did some thorough cleaning up. At seven-thirty I was on the road to The Hazels once more behind a fairly good horse, with mingled feelings of foreboding and eager anticipation for company—besides the stable-boy who drove me.

I found King out walking in the public road before the grounds when we arrived and I got down at once and dismissed my boy.

He did not offer to shake hands with me and I thought him a trifle cold, but I attributed it promptly to anxiety. We approached each other with questions in the eyes and on the lips of each.

"How are they?" asked I.

"Any clue?" queried he.

And then we answered together. I told him in three sentences all the essentials of my adventure. It would be useless to detail the story to him, I thought. I ended with a question about the place to which the scared little man in the porch had told me the girl had been removed.

"Hart? Old Drom?" he repeated after me. "Oh yes. Old Drom is short for Old Dromedary and it's a two-humped old mountain up back of the village of Hart about eighty miles west. Bain's got a railroad that runs up into the mountains there, and some timber interests."

"Does Barnaby know the place?"

"Sure."

"Then let's tell him. I've effectually ended my own usefulness as a spy upon Bain. He'll be on the outlook for me now."

I thought King's handsome face clouded at the word, but he did not comment. "Yes," he said, "we'll tell Barnaby. He can handle the matter."

"And Hal?" I asked then.

"Hal is in bad shape," he answered slowly. "If we can't do something in this case quickly Bain and Scancey will get their revenge and their protection, too, without striking another blow."

"You mean?"

"I mean that the thing is so preying on Hal's mind that there will be basis for an insanity inquiry if we don't relieve him."

I had feared it. "And Donna?" I asked, using the girl's given name quite unconsciously and innocently in my earnest solicitude.

My companion looked suddenly at me with sharp examination.

"Donna?" he answered. "She is as brave as could be expected."

I felt that there was a shade of question about me in his mind now. I can scarcely blame him as I look back upon the time, but I resented it then and I believe the breach that came between us two began in a rift of confidence at that moment.

"What does Doctor Graham say of Philbric?" I asked.

"Just what he has from the first."

"Has Scancey made any move?"

"None."

"And the coroner?"

"The jury met yesterday. They withheld a verdict."

"Withheld a verdict!"

"Insufficient evidence."

I stared at him. "Why, how could they, man?"

"They did."

"But if they haven't evidence of guilt they must acquit."

"They can investigate further."

"They can. Have they done that?"

"They sent officers here again yesterday."

"Not to arrest—Hal?"

"No. We had another search and another painful examination of Philbric. We had more suggestions of mental irresponsibility."

"From Graham?" I asked sharply.

"Graham!" King looked at me. "That sounds as if you thought Doctor Graham had put forward that theory," he said.

"He did," I answered, "to Hal."

King's eyes examined my face again. "Mr. Randall," he said, "Doctor Graham is too wise a physician and too old a friend of the family to make such a suggestion about a member of it. I should suppose a man of your long intimacy with the Philbrics would know that."

His eyes grew sharp as they remained fixed on mine and again I began to resent his attitude. What had changed him toward me? Had he been told the story of my peculiar introduction to this house of Philbric and did he look upon me with suspicion? I could not guess, but I did not intend to give him the information myself. I gave the subject a fling that might lead us away from the ground he had touched.

"Graham said enough in my hearing to show that Hal had the impression from him, Mr. King," I said, and I could not keep a trace of coldness out of my tone. "Besides," I added, "he was the only *friend* with Philbric for an hour or two after the shooting."

"Hal couldn't have had a better one," said King.

A sudden idea leaped into my mind. "King!" I exclaimed. "Who was the first person to examine the body of Clarence Salver after the shooting?"

We stood in the road together just at the entrance gates to the grounds. We had paused in our walk toward the house, unconsciously facing each other in quite natural, but wholly instinctive, expression of our mental attitudes.

"Mr. Randall," said King, persisting now in the formal address, "what have you against Graham?"

"I have not expressed a feeling against Doctor Graham," I answered.

"You have even if unconsciously," he said.

"Then I'll confess it," I answered.

"And so you would raise a question against him?"

"I have raised no question against Graham," said I. "I asked who first examined Salver's body."

He still studied my face. I was studying his now. We were almost combative and I felt a vague sense of regret over the fact at the moment, for I liked and respected Robert King.

"I suppose Hal himself or old John Kent, the butler, must have made the first search for the letters," he said slowly and with careful articulation.

I put my hand out upon his shoulder with sudden impulse to break down the misunderstanding that was rising between us. "Look here, King," said I,

"this won't do. We are splitting apart, you and I. You don't know me but you must take me on faith as a friend of the family—as I take you."

"There are no secrets about me," he said, drawing away from my hand, "and I do not raise unwarranted suspicions against other friends of the family, who have been tried out and found true."

"King," said I, "some one has been poisoning your mind against me. I shall not attempt to justify myself till you tell me frankly what you have against me."

A moment's look of uncertainty clouded his eyes, but he did not answer me as frankly as I had made my question.

"You are an utter stranger to me, Mr. Randall," he said, "and to Barnaby, and to Graham." He paused, then turned suddenly away from me. "Shall we go to the house? There's enough to do there."

"I fancy we shall hear from Bain to-day," I said, taking his lead, with slow anger toward him beginning to burn in my heart. I admit I was not reasonable. But he had spurned my attempt at an understanding.

"Perhaps," he replied.

"You are out early," I suggested. I meant still to do my share toward preserving amicable relations at least.

"I was looking for tracks," he answered abruptly.

"Tracks?"

"Yes—man tracks."

"What do you mean?"

"We are being spied upon also," he said shortly.

"Spies?"

"Yes. The game seems popular."

There was sting in this and I felt it. My anger rose. I began to see that there was more than a mere question as to the length of standing of my friendship with the family in his mind. My pride stirred. But I held my resentment well in hand.

"Apparently," I answered him. "You've seen signs of them here?" I queried, interest in this new development helping me to forget his offensive manner.

"Somebody has prowled about the grounds for two evenings—since you've been gone," he said, walking steadily along the gravel drive, without looking at me. "Also, somebody has been putting idiotic, melodramatic, but painfully disturbing messages in Hal's room in secret fashion. Somebody who is an enemy has been playing worse havoc with the boy's mind than any direct threat from Bain could do."

My concern suddenly grew too deep for my anger against him. "King," I exclaimed, "what's that? Secret messages? What—anonymous notes, I suppose?"

"Yes, anonymous, of course," he answered, but he turned to look at me again with a peculiar flash of the eye. "Yesterday morning the boy found

a letter in red ink on his dresser, bearing a crude drawing of a man behind bars. At the top were the words, 'Asylum for insane.' Below were the boy's own initials, 'H. P.'"

I listened incredulous. This was strange indeed. "Of course you haven't traced that to a source?"

"Of course not. Last night there was another—a rough drawing of a grotesquely wild-looking man laced in a strait-jacket—with no explanatory captions."

"And there's no evidence as to who brought it?" asked I, fairly wincing myself as I thought of the probable effect of such a thing on the sick boy.

"No *evidence*." King emphasized the second word, and paused. I did not understand a double meaning then and merely waited for him to continue. "And last night there was still another equally crude and equally brutal—a figure tied upon a bed—with face distorted and hands clinched—rather clever in a way—and the words, 'The Finish,' beneath the picture."

I was silent. The thing was at once too exasperating and too dismaying for me to find ready comment.

We were approaching the house now and on the veranda I saw Donna Philbric. The sight of her took away my wish to reply at the moment to King. I went forward and up the steps to her eagerly.

She met me cordially enough to warm my heart after the frigidity of King's greeting. She was

pale and her sweet face had evidence of pain and anxiety in it. But the clasp of her fingers upon mine meant friendship unshaken by what had clearly disturbed the confidence of the others. My heart went out to her in sympathy as she smiled up bravely at me and said a kind good-morning.

We went into the house together, we three, Donna between King and me, with her eager questions turned first to me; and I told her my tale briefly as I had told it first. She led us straight to the breakfast room and we sat at table while the maids brought us coffee. Aunt Charlotte joined us, but Hal had remained in his room. There had been no repetition of the trick that had been practised against him three times.

"I had his room guarded last night," explained King succinctly.

Whether Donna noted the strained relations between us, her friends, or not I could not tell. She did not show it and naturally the conversation was immediately upon the newest feature of Hal's trouble. They told me that nothing had been done toward solving the problem as to who was guilty of putting the "red letters," as Donna called them, in the boy's room. They had tried to keep the matter secret and to detect the guilty person by watching. It seemed that some servant must, of course, be the agent in the conveyance of such messages if they came from outside enemies, but they seemed unable to fix upon any one who had ready

access to the chambers as a person who could be fairly suspected.

We discussed all sides of the matter, but it was not till we adjourned to the library and found Hal there ahead of us and painfully eager to take up thorough investigation that we decided to question the servants.

I could not see as I looked at Hal, who greeted me almost joyfully, that there was material change in his appearance. Indeed, his color was high and his eyes bright and he seemed stronger and more quiet in manner. It was only after some time that I began to note the worst symptoms.

It was Donna's own suggestion that I as the one whose mind came freshest to the subject should conduct the examination of the servants, and I cannot deny some gratification in that trifling matter. I was ready enough to ask questions, certainly, impatient to know and to deal out punishment to the offender, and to extract such comfort for Hal as we could from any revelations we might produce. So I accepted the task somewhat to King's satisfaction, I now believe.

CHAPTER XIV

HEARTS INSURGENT

WE began with old John, but not because we suspected him. Certainly we did not. But he it was who was chief of the servants and who was conversant with all that had occurred. John was a sure ally. He had been with the family from the time when Congdon Philbric, Hal's father, had brought home his bride when the big house was new. His loyalty had been tried and proved. And we began by taking him into our confidence.

"John," I said to him when the vigorous old fellow came at Donna's call and stood before us, "have you seen the notes Mr. Philbric has received?"

"Yes, sir," he answered promptly with an involuntary quick glance at Hal.

"All right then, you understand exactly what has happened, do you not?"

"I think so, sir."

His eyes were a good gray of the sort I like. I have never known a man with that sort of gray eye who was not truthful and a fighter, no matter what his station in life.

"Did any strangers come about yesterday or today, John?" I asked him.

He looked at me slightly puzzled. "Why, I suppose so, sir. There's always a stranger or two here during a day. Beggars will stop and there's plenty of delivery boys and occasional workmen about the place who don't regularly belong here. I s'pose you'd call them strangers, sir."

"Could any one whom you do not know—any one of these strangers—have had access to the room Hal occupies, John, at the times when servants were not about?"

He paused to consider. His eyes went from face to face of us for a clue to our purpose or our suspicions. It was clear that he had no guilty knowledge of the thing.

"I won't say it isn't possible, Mr. Randall," he replied, after a moment so. Then he asked his question frankly. "What do you suspect, sir?"

I took the "red letters" which Donna had brought me from the table where she had put them and held them out to him.

"These, John, were put in Hal's room by somebody either stranger or servant. They were found on the dresser. Hal thinks they were intended for him by his enemies."

He took the things and glanced at them, then read the letters over slowly. His eyes widened a little.

"Now," said I, "could a stranger, or anybody at all, get into the house and up to Hal's room,—which has always been Hal's, has it not?—and leave these things and get away again unseen?"

He hesitated again for a second's time. "Well, Mr. Randall, this house hasn't been no guarded fort, you know. We haven't been looking for spies and fellows like that. But I think it would be a fairly hard thing to do what you say."

"The room is a front room on the main hall?"

"Yes, sir."

"And maids or somebody have been constantly in the halls?"

"I should think so, sir."

"Doesn't it imply a servant's knowledge of the house to be able to accomplish such a thing?" suggested Donna.

"Not if somebody outside were in collusion with a servant," said Hal himself.

Old John nodded. "It would be easy for a man outside to get information if he could get help, Miss Donna."

"Then it's conceivable that our enemy has an accomplice here among the servants," said I. "Let's start on that basis. Now, who is it?"

Old John shook his head and both Donna and Hal looked helpless.

"I don't know one on whom I'm willing to cast a suspicion," said the girl anxiously. "They all seem to be good, faithful, honest people."

"How about that French maid that helps Mrs. Griggs in the linen room?" asked Aunt Charlotte suddenly.

Donna's eyes came quickly to mine, pained with

the thought of charging duplicity against any of the household; but I took my cue from the fact that she was not ready with defense of the maid.

"How about her, John?" I asked. "Not that we intend to charge anybody with this, you understand; but we must search each possibility, and do it quickly."

Old John was considering. "She's been here a year and over, sir," he said. "She has done good work. She's a bit flighty but I've never known her to have any acquaintance in the village beyond a girl or two. I don't know that she's even ever heard of Judson Bain."

"I've never liked the girl," said Mrs. Philbric positively.

"I've always been rather sorry for her," said Donna. "She doesn't seem to have many friends anywhere. The servants don't seem to have taken to her and Mrs. Griggs, the housekeeper, is rather hard upon her, I think."

"Where does she work?" I asked.

"In the linen-room and the laundry," answered Aunt Charlotte.

"She handles all the linen practically all the time," put in John.

"The laundry's in the basement?"

"Yes," said Donna. "The linen-room is on this first floor, at the side. It's—it's near the little side door that leads to the garage path across the east lawn."

She looked again at me anxiously and I could see that her active mind was swifter in contemplation of possibilities than the rest of us.

"Has she seemed kindly disposed toward the family?"

"Not toward me," said Hal. "I wouldn't have her about my study when she first came here and was made second chambermaid. She fingered my papers too much. That's why Mrs. Griggs put her in the linen-room. I guess she suspected I didn't like her and she has always kept shy of me."

"Why," said Donna abruptly, "I noticed that, too."

Old John shifted from foot to foot.

"I think she's only afraid of you, Mr. Hal," he volunteered. "She's timid."

"Is there anybody else who could be thought of in this connection?" I asked.

No one spoke. Hal abruptly lay back in his chair with his eyes closed, looking very tired. Donna turned to watch him apprehensively at the movement. Mrs. Philbric put her glasses down from where they had rested high on her forehead and rose to her feet. She busied herself a moment about the table, then motioned to John with her head and started for the door.

"Wait," she said sententiously to me as she passed.

Donna went to Hal's side. "Dear," she said,

"don't you want to go and rest now? All this detail shouldn't be allowed to tire you out."

The boy opened his eyes and smiled as she bent over him. Then he reached up and drew her face down beside his own and she sank on her knees at the arm of his chair.

Both turned toward me and the movement brought their faces side by side in exactly the same light. In the instant I fairly started at the amazing likeness of them. The girl's hair was dressed low and smooth about her fine head in the prevailing mode. Hal's was soft and fine and he had ruffled it slightly with his fingers. The effect was such that, with the color now in Hal's face, the one head seemed to have been cast in the identical mold of the other. I laughed and told them so.

"If you were both men or both girls it wouldn't be hard for you to impersonate each other," I suggested.

"We used to do it successfully years ago in private theatricals," answered Donna, looking at King, whose silence was growing noticeable. "Now make Hal go and rest, Bob," she added. "He shouldn't be worn out with all this. We'll tell you the whole of it when we find out anything, Hal."

The boy rose slowly from his chair. "I'll go, sis," he answered for himself. "I'm the least useful person about in this miserable pickle of mine." He laughed up into my face as I rose beside him but I

saw the white line along the edge of his lips again and my response was not hilarious.

"Do as your sister wants you to, old boy," I told him. "We are going to put up a good fight for you. The best way I know to fight is to carry the war into the enemy's country. We won't stop with defense alone. Men like this Bain and Scancey can be reached and we'll reach 'em hard, too."

I had no conception what our fight would be, but I have yet to see the just cause in which no blow can be struck at the enemy.

An instant after King rose to his feet. "I think I'll go up with the boy," he said. "Excuse me, will you, Donna?"

The girl turned back toward me, her sweet face alight with kindly thankfulness to me. "That helps him more than anything else," she said, coming to the table beside which I sat.

"I'll help him all I can," I answered her sincerely enough.

Her slender hands rested on the mahogany. They were within the reach of my own and a sudden rush of tenderness toward her suggested wild thoughts. She was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen and her sweetly gentle mood of gratitude toward me for loyalty to her brother roused dangerous response in me. I am human. I could have seized her in my arms then and cried out love to her. I looked up into her face steadily as I could and spoke of Hal.

"He's in a trap," I said, "but a man trapped is not a man caught necessarily." And I smiled at a recollection of my own.

"Tell me one way to fight them. It will help me to hope," she said, and the tears welled slowly up in her eyes.

"We will fight any way to win," I answered. "When you face an unscrupulous enemy you can strike as hard as you like. We are going to find that girl or those letters and we'll send Judson Bain to the pen."

"And if we can't?"

"If there's an 'if' in it that I don't see now and the deal goes against us, I'll run away with Hal myself and take him into hiding in the mountains till the cards are in our hands again."

"Won't they arrest Hal?"

"They'll summon him to court probably. But they'll take bond for his appearance or arrange for a test of his sanity, and——"

I stopped. She had suddenly covered her face with her hands. "Oh," she whispered, "I know what they mean to do! They mean to break him down by the very test itself. He can't stand it and they know it. They'll drive him—oh, they'll drive him actually insane."

I rose and stood beside her. "They won't," I said. "That may be their game, but I won't let it come to that if I have to go to Judson Bain with something besides a writ of injunction!"

She withdrew her hands and looked up at me, a long, earnest, searching look. It was the sort of gaze that would have taken the heart out of bluff or bluster, but I had no notion of either. I knew that I would not let Hal Philbric's enemies touch him so irretrievably if my strength and my life could be his buckler, and I would have dared much for the smile that grew in that dear girl's eyes as she measured my earnestness and believed. I sickened at heroics and I despise bravado, but who would not promise—and fulfil—who had an ounce of fighting blood for such cause?

She put out her hand and touched mine. "You are a good friend, Dan Randall. I know what you would do," she answered.

Her courage came back then. She smiled more lightly and moved to her chair while I sat once more with my heart pounding a wild drumming in my ears. Her touch had been like fire to me again and I had not dared to turn my hand to grasp her gentle fingers. When Mrs. Philbric returned presently alone we were sitting wordless, each buried in individual thought. Hers I do not know and mine I shall not repeat.

CHAPTER XV

A LONG-ARMED ENEMY

"IT is very curious," said Aunt Charlotte as she came back to us. "Donna, Aileen has gone out for the day. Aileen is the maid we spoke of, Mr. Randall. Mrs. Griggs and I have been to her room. We opened a drawer or two in her dresser at random—and we found this."

She held out a slip of paper to me and I took it curiously. It was a small square sheet about as large as a common square envelope and considerably soiled. On it in red ink was traced what seemed to be a design of some sort but quite blind to me. I studied it an instant, then handed it to Donna, who had risen to look.

"More red ink," I said.

"What is it?"

But Donna took the reply from her aunt's lips. "Why!" she exclaimed. "It's a plan—of the paths in the grounds. I'd know it anywhere because I used to pore over it when I was a little girl when the architects' drawings used to be in father's office. But I haven't seen it for years."

We looked at each other rather blankly. What connection had this odd find with our quest? Had

it any whatever? Might it not be evidence of what we feared? Might it not, on the other hand, be the most innocent bit of memorandum?

"But why red?" It was Donna who put the question as if her mind had arrived at that point in very unison with mine.

"Just so," said Aunt Charlotte.

"It matches the 'red letters.'"

"It does."

"But red ink is almost as common as black."

"Yes. But the only red ink in the house is in Mrs. Griggs' room, I believe." Mrs. Philbric compressed her lips at conclusion of her sentences. Clearly she was predisposed to believe that something about this girl, whom she did not like, would be found to need explaining.

"Does Mrs. Griggs know where she is?" I asked.

"Yes—that is, Aileen told the housekeeper she was going to the village. She will come back to-night. Each of the servants has a day off each week."

It was just at this point that the arrival of Barnaby at the house interrupted us. He came in hearty and cheerful with a tonic-like assurance of manner that seemed good to me. He had come to tell us a trifle of good news, too. This was that no move would be made that day by our enemies. He had seen the coroner and had suggested an autopsy as a means of delay, and the official, who had known

Hal from boyhood and who had no love for Judson Bain or Wheeler Scancey, had directed that this formality be carried out. The curious non-appearance of Bain, too, who had been expected to push the charge against Hal, made delay possible, for Scancey would not make the accusation and the verdict of the jury could still be held off on the plea of lack of evidence.

Barnaby's greeting to me was frank and friendly. He asked a few quick, sharp questions about Bain and he only laughed when I disclosed enough of my adventure—to him alone—to show why Bain had not put in an appearance in Hazelhurst. He did not seem disposed to entertain prejudice against me. And he welcomed the news about the lost girl in a way that made me hope he would get results from that. He immediately put into words the thing I had been feeling more and more strongly—that Bain must have a keen fear indeed of what Luella Westfall might tell, or he would not be making an effort to keep her hidden. He was undoubtedly busied with that task now, too, or I had been unbelievably deceived.

My news had the effect of sending the lawyer hastily back to town, however, and I was not displeased that King, who had spent the night at The Hazels, decided to go in with him. The latter promised to return later in the day. When they had gone I spent an hour with Hal, who kept to his room, and talked to him of the most cheering

things I could think of till he showed again that he was weary.

It was when I left him to go downstairs again, with just a hope of a possible talk with Donna, that a new strange thing occurred. I went out into the wide upper hall on which Hal's room faced. It was but a step or two to my own room and I thought to run in there for a moment to get some camp photographs I had brought from a recent expedition into the Northwest. I thought Donna might find some pleasure in them. Besides, I was debating a matter in my own mind concerning camp-life in the mountains for Hal. We might be forced to run away from this thing. It had occurred to me that the pictures might interest Donna in that scheme as a hope, too, to keep her from deep forebodings.

As I approached the room, however, I heard a sound inside. Stopping to listen I gained the impression that one of the maids must be at work there. Not wishing to disturb her I turned back and started downstairs. I had barely descended a half dozen step when there was a sharp little crash that I instantly located in my room and I paused again. Then in a flash it occurred to me that it could do no harm to look.

I mounted slowly and softly. I was not conscious that I had previously made any great noise on the heavy hall carpets, and an instinct to caution, explainable enough, held me. I crept back to the

head of the stairs and then around to the half-open door of the chamber and looked in. In the first instant I saw nothing extraordinary. In the next the curtains before an open window blew in with a wide trailing sweep in the current of a vigorous breeze. I could see nothing that suggested the presence of a person, however, and I pushed the door wide and stepped in.

Instantly I became aware of a faint odor that I knew for stale cigarette smoke. I do not smoke cigarettes and I abominate the stench of them, but it is familiar enough. There had been no cigarettes smoked in my room to my knowledge since my arrival, and the odor was not the sort that would carry far on such a boisterous breeze as this that was blowing in now.

But while I sniffed at the offensive smell and looked for a trace of a smoker I saw on the floor by the window a small glass vase lying broken beside the wainscot. It had been on the dresser which stood close by the open casement. First thought would naturally be that the swinging curtain had drifted against it and knocked it off. But as I glanced at the place where it had stood I saw that this was improbable. The very closeness of the dresser to the window forced the blowing curtain to slip aside and swing around the front of the massive piece of furniture, and my own dressing-case stood on the end of the dresser in such a way that it would seem to protect the vase.

I crossed to the window and picked up the broken glass. Then I looked about. I had almost a conviction that some one had been in the room. There was one door besides the one into the hall that might serve as an exit. I went to it quickly and tried it. It was locked. I turned. There were only two other doors in the room. One led to a commodious closet and the other to the bath. No one who would try to run away from me would be likely to seek hiding there. The impression that the door I had tried was locked on the other side, too, was strong upon me. I decided quickly to investigate.

I stepped into the hall and to the door of the next room. I knew it to be an unoccupied chamber, for I had noticed it before. But as I entered I came upon Mrs. Griggs, the housekeeper, standing by the door which evidently was the one I had just tried.

"Oh!" she said quickly when she saw me, "it was you, was it?"

"I just tried the door," I answered. "Were you the one who was in my room just now?"

"Just now?" She looked puzzled. "No, sir. I haven't been in there yet. Hasn't the maid done the work?"

"I didn't notice," said I. "But somebody was in there a moment ago, I think. I got the impression that he or she came out through this door."

She looked at me incredulously. Then she turned

and pointed. "No," she replied. "It's locked on this side." A heavy brass bolt was the fastening.

"But he could have pushed the bolt home," I suggested.

"But no one has come through this way," she answered. "In the first place the door-lock itself is fastened and there is no key here, as we never use this door. Besides, I've been here in the room myself for fifteen minutes, at least."

It was convincing enough. I turned without explanation and ran back to my own room. It was still as if no one had entered it at all. But the same faint odor of cigarettes was in the air. I went to the bath and to the closet and looked in perfunctorily. The bath-room was alight with the sunshine that came through wide windows, and empty. The closet, in which I turned on an electric light, contained only my own clothing.

I went back and looked out the windows. It was full twenty feet to the lawn below and there was no ledge or other foothold for a possible climber. I began to wonder if my own nerves were getting overwrought. But Mrs. Griggs had followed me solicitously to the door of the room and I spoke to her.

"Smell cigarettes?" I asked. She nodded, sniffing. I pointed to the broken vase which I had laid on the dresser. "That lay under the window just now," I told her. "I heard it fall from the hall and came to look. There's where it stood," I

added, pointed out the exact position on the dresser-top. "Could this blowing curtain have raked it off?"

She studied the movement of the lacy folds as they swept in before the breeze. "It doesn't seem so, sir," she answered.

"Well," said I, "we've got a full-sized puzzler here sure, or I'm getting stupid. Which is it?"

She looked at me solemnly with literal application of my words. She was English. "You are not stupid, Mr. Randall."

I laughed in spite of my rather angry mystification over my problem. "Think not? I've been known to be, Mrs. Griggs."

CHAPTER XVI

WOUNDS OF A FRIEND

DONNA was not in the house when I went downstairs to find her. She and her aunt had gone out. So I set about an exploration of the grounds. Surely our enemies' movements were shrouded in darkness and they were taking mysterious means to compass their ends. Their game was too diabolically dangerous a one to treat the slightest evidence of their movements lightly, or I would have laughed at the cheap trick of the anonymous notes. But, distressing as these messages seemed to have been to Hal, they were infuriating to me and my fingers tingled to lay hold upon both principal and agent in the perpetration of this outrage.

I made a round of the grounds and later of the house, under guidance of old John, whom I pressed into service. I spent most of the remainder of the morning at this, with my thoughts partly upon this and partly on the occurrences of the past day or two. I remembered Judson Bain and the alarm raised at Cold Spring and I wondered how the pepper-filled eyes were thriving. He would kill me

for that trick if he ever had the chance, I was confident.

As Donna was still absent and Hal was reported to be asleep I was served a somewhat lonely luncheon. When that was over I went to look over stables and garage, for there was nothing more I could do now till my friends returned, or till evening gave me opportunity for the execution of a fresh plan. It was while I was at the garage that I saw King's car brought round from the front and knew he was back again, so I stayed away the longer for that reason. I did not know that Donna had also returned and that I might be in request, but I loitered about, thinking that I would give King a chance to find some entertainment or employment for himself before I should go in. Then I could leave him without gratuitous discourtesy and follow my own devices.

It came as a surprise to me, therefore, when, as I was walking in one of the paths along the outer boundary of the immediate house-grounds, I heard the voices of Donna and of King together and looked out through the trees to see them both mounted and riding side by side in the road outside the palings. Evidently they had ordered the horses within the past few minutes and were off for a jaunt together.

My altered feeling toward King naturally did not improve as I saw the position he held with the girl. I had no right to indulge a feeling of jealousy, of

course, for my own position, so far as anything nearer than friendship to Donna Philbric was concerned, was simply nil. But when did jealousy base itself upon reason? Perhaps that malady will seek such foundation when love itself takes sober judgment and grave selection as its guides. And jealous I was—of King—because I could not look upon Donna Philbric and choose not to love her. Four days ago I had seen her first, but in my own heart there was no wonder at the fact of my passion—for passion it had become. I loved the girl and knew it. And I knew King loved her and that he stood first—so far above me, indeed, that my hope was faint.

I stood in the shrubbery beside the high iron palings and watched them ride away toward the nearer hills. They rode close together and there was no mistaking the man's attitude. Without the earlier glimpse I had had of them in close intimacy the very bend of his head to her as he reined his mount in toward hers would have told me the story. And he was a fine chap, too, was King. Despite his cold lack of confidence in me I could not deny that. I turned away as they rounded a bend of the road and passed out of sight, and I made my way back to the house with the feeling that my life had suddenly lost its savor.

I went in and up the stairs to my room. Then the thought of Hal took me to him. I went to get away from myself then. I found the boy awake

and sitting silent and very quiet in his room in his odd costume of coat and cap.

"Hello, old man," said I from his doorway. "Had a good rest?"

He looked up with his smile sweet as a girl's. "I've been going over it again and again, Randall," he said, "and I seem to remember every detail."

"Of the fight, Philbric?"

"Yes. Do you want to listen?"

"I do indeed."

"I'll tell you how clearly I can see the details. I can see Punk Salver's tobacco-stained lips that always sagged around his teeth with a droop as if the muscles were too weak to hold them up. I can see just how they formed the words when he said, 'Them letters there, Hal, will send Old Jud Bain and Scancey to the pen.'"

"Yes," answered I, looking into his clear eyes and wondering how we could fear at any time for his mental stamina.

"I can see him as he held those letters before me," went on the boy. "They trembled so I had to put my own hands on them to steady them, and I can remember just how he jerked away, afraid I was going to get them from him. Randall, I can remember Punk's very thumbs—his dirty, stubby thumbs at the edges of the sheets as he held them."

"You have a strong visualizing power."

"Yes. But would I remember such things—such

details—if the thing were a dream—if I had only imagined the letters? ”

“ Nonsense, man. Your eyes and memory and judgment are as sound as any one’s.”

“ Dan,” he said, for the first time speaking my given name alone, “ I can remember so many things like that. I remember just how ashy pale old John was when he came into the library, except for the red mark on his forehead where he had struck his head when he fell down in the hall. Poor old boy, he was hurt, too, I guess. And I remember how he went to Salver’s body lying on the rug and how he started as if he had burned his fingers when I told him sharply to let it alone till we could get the doctor. I even remember how he turned around half dazed while I told him what had happened—and his hands commenced doing little things around the table mechanically—closing books, and straightening things up according to his habit. I can remember how his hand trembled, too, when he put the cover on my tobacco jar on the table, so that he made a regular tattoo. I had had the jar open testing the tobacco, which I thought was drying out since the doctor made me stop smoking.”

“ You saw all the details with unusual clearness,” said I. “ That oftens happens when people are under very great excitement.”

“ I seemed to think of all the things I should think of, too,” said the boy. “ I can’t see now what I could have done that I didn’t do.”

"I think you showed remarkably good judgment," I assented.

"And yet," said Hal, "those letters are utterly lost." He looked at me with a query rising in his dark eyes again. "Randall, they were there in Punk's hands—under those dirty thumbs—and then when Doctor Graham searched him they were gone."

"Oh," said I, "Graham searched him, did he?"

"Yes," answered Philbric. "The doctor was the first and only person to touch him except myself. And Salver hadn't left the room or had any chance to remove the letters."

"I understand that much," I replied. "I can't fathom the secret of their present whereabouts."

"They are in that room yet," said Hal.

"If somebody isn't a traitor."

I looked to see the effect of my words. The boy stared at me with slowly widening eyes.

"John?" he whispered.

"Is it possible?" I asked.

"No," he said and shook his head. "John is as faithful as my shadow."

"Who else, then?" I asked. "Somebody in this house is tricking us with these ridiculous 'red letters.'"

"Yes; but, Randall, those letters come by means of hands, and nobody entered that room from the time Punk fell except John and Doctor Graham, till the coroner came."

"Could Graham—have missed the letters?" I questioned slowly.

Philbric's eyes scanned my face with sudden sharpness. "Dan!" he said with the accent of remonstrance.

"Nobody is infallible!"

"I know. But that wasn't what your tone implied."

"If only Doctor Graham touched Salver," said I, "we must examine Graham's entire reliability."

"Why, man, he has been our family physician for years."

"All right. That puts him above suspicion as a searcher for lost evidence, does it?"

Philbric hesitated. "He's above suspicion of disloyalty or carelessness," he said. "He's no more infallible than I am. But, Randall, I stood beside him while he worked over Salver. I stood by when he and the coroner worked again. I helped make the search of the rooms. The papers have not been found."

"Salver didn't eat them," said I, with a grim smile.

"No, he couldn't. There were some six or seven of them. They would make a hard mouthful to swallow."

"It is my belief, Hal, that they are not in that room now," I stated.

The boy was still in his chair by the window. He suddenly pushed aside the afghan that covered

his knees. "Dan," he said, "let's go and look together—just you and I while nobody else is here."

He got to his feet. I rose also from the chair I had taken and reached my arm to him with the sense that he needed help to walk.

"No, no," he said with a slightly annoyed laugh. "I'm sound in wind and limb if I am a bit shaken in nerves."

He led the way with some haste and we went out and down the stairs together. At the library the boy turned to me.

"Now," he began, "you go and stand by the window over there. I've done it, actually and in imagination, a dozen times. Face me here and stand and think. If you had a handful of letters to hide and to hide quick, where would you put them?"

I followed his directions with a recognition of the value of the method. I stood by the window where Punk Salver had stood. I tried to think what could have been the course his mind had taken on that fatal morning when he had held those now lost letters in his hand, and had had one minute perhaps, in which to conceal them safely.

I looked about. Books and cases, the rugs, curtains, vases, bits of bric-a-brac. I felt that the books would have suggested the best hiding-place to me if I had thought of hiding the letters at all. It seemed a strange thing for the little blackmailer to do, but what more clever after all? He put the things out of his possession and made them safe when he ex-

pected that servants and perhaps officers would soon be searching him. He could readily hope to regain possession of them by obtaining secret entrance to the room again. He had no hope in any other course, indeed. And then he had remembered the gun in the table drawer—of which he must have had a previous knowledge—and had tried to use it in a sort of desperate turning to bay.

I went over his course so far as we knew it and asked every question that came to me, foolish or otherwise, as the chemist tries every drug at his command in experiment to obtain a desired combination.

“We’ve looked under rugs and in books,” said I. “We’ve poked inside the vases, we’ve looked in the fireplace and chimney, and tried for loose tiles about the hearth. We’ve looked in the tubes of the fire-screen and between the bookcases. Did you—look in the base of the electric lamp on the table?”

“Yes. It is empty.”

“Did you look in the tobacco-jar which you said you saw John close?”

“Yes. It is two-thirds full of tobacco.”

“Did you look under the cushions in the Morris chair?”

“Yes.”

“In all the drawers of the writing desk?”

“Yes.”

“Under the blotting-pad?”

“Yes.”

"Did you look at the under side of the upholstered chairs—in the springs?"

"Of every one in which the springs are open, yes."

"Under the coal in the scuttle?"

"No. I think not. But the scuttle has been several times emptied since then."

"Of course. There's no place on the chandelier where the letters could be hidden?"

"You can see for yourself."

"He couldn't have gotten them inside that filigree brass work sphere, could he?"

"They'd show if he did."

"Sure they would. How about the globes?"

"I looked in every one, myself."

"How about those magazines? Did you look in them?"

"Every one."

"And the sliding leaves of the writing desk? There'd be room for letters on them."

"I've pulled them both out a dozen times."

"Did you look between the blotter and its pad?"

"Yes."

"Under those plant jars?"

"Yes."

"Was the waste-basket searched?"

"It was."

"How about the newspapers and such things on the table that morning?"

"We opened every last sheet of them." Hal

came forward from the door and sat down in his big chair. He was paler again and tremulous, but he tried to smile. "We've looked—everywhere," he asserted.

"It sounds like it," I admitted, and the conviction began again to creep into my mind that there was treachery against the boy somewhere. There was not a spot within the six sides of that room that had not been scrutinized now. And Punk Salver had had time that was measurable only in seconds in which to find repository for his letters. I felt that I knew every article in the place and was convinced that the letters were not there. And with that conviction what remained? Either old John Kent or Doctor Graham was a traitor. What other explanation was there—unless we accepted Graham's own unhappy suggestion that went back to Hal himself with question of his very senses?

"Hal," said I, sitting in a chair by the hearth, "has it occurred to you that it must appear to the outsider to lie between you and Graham?"

I put the question suddenly and he made a nervous start. I was sorry the instant I had spoken, for I saw that he construed me wrong. I had meant no reflection upon his condition, God knows, but he took it so.

"Dan!" he cried.

He leaned forward in his chair and put his hands up to his head, then leaned back again and clenched his fingers together.

"I thought," he said hoarsely, "that you believed in me. Dan—good God, Dan, am I going insane?"

I sprang to my feet and a wild curse at my own monstrous stupidity leaped to my lips.

"Hal, boy!" I cried, throwing reserve to the winds. "It is not you I suspect. It's Graham!"

I crossed to his side and put my hands on his shoulders and felt them trembling as if he shivered with the cold. Poor, poor chap! He was like a girl in frame as well as in sensitiveness then. I felt the impulse one feels with a child in trouble to pick him up in my arms and hold him till the fright should pass. I looked down into his eyes.

"Hal, there's some natural, reasonable, ordinary every-day explanation of this. You are no more crazy than I am or Graham or King, or your sister—and she's the sanest person I know."

The boy's eyes had terror written in them as plainly as I care to see it and his look wrung my heart. I would have given all I possessed to recall the clumsy sentence I had let slip. Suddenly, out of the sense of extremity to which the situation brought me the idea of the radical measure I had earlier half anticipated took shape, and I blurted it out.

"Hal, we'll run away from this accursed strain. We'll run away! We'll go to the woods—to the mountains—and let somebody else work out this mystery. I'll take you with me and take care of

you and you'll get well while Barnaby and the rest work this case out to its end. You are being worried to death. Let's go and quit it and forget it."

He shivered, but he sat up slowly and shook his head. "No; if I'm not right mentally I want to know it," he said painfully. "I'd better have the test."

He sobbed helplessly, and then, suddenly, he collapsed in his chair and was unconscious.

Horried I leaped to the bell and rang wildly for John. The old fellow came so quickly that I was assured he had been on the watch to serve us. I told him to get Graham. Then I began to try restorative methods and presently found the boy returning to consciousness.

I laid him on the couch and sat beside him after he took a bit of brandy that the old butler brought. Neither of us spoke and I waited in sick misery for the doctor's coming. I could not know how much damage I had done the boy.

CHAPTER XVII

A MEETING IN THE DARK

AS luck would have it Graham was out and John sent for another doctor, a younger man of the neighborhood, who came promptly. His grave look over Hal when I had told him the truth did not comfort me. It hurt me worse, indeed, than similar seriousness from Graham would have done. We took Hal to his room. The doctor gave him a medicine which he explained to me was a powerful sleeping potion. Then he left additional doses for use later and went away, promising to find and send Graham; and I, quite wretched, watched the lad go off into slumber and then crept back down to the library to spend a wholly miserable afternoon recalling my blunder and considering a gloomy future indeed.

When Donna and King came back at last, I welcomed them eagerly. I told them just what had occurred and I had a glare from King's eyes that meant only one thing henceforth from him. Donna paled with pitiful anxiety and ran to Hal's room, where she stayed to watch by the side of the still sleeping boy.

King and I read the papers and then made a pretense of talking the case over, but I knew I should quarrel with him if I stayed in his company, for his manner gave offense despite my fault. He had no charity for me. So I left him and went again to the stables, where I asked for and got a mount. And as the dusk set in I galloped off down the road to bring my own brain back to cool clarity and calmness.

I rode long. My horse was fresh and the roads were amazingly good for the early spring. I cared not to eat and so through the dinner hour I spurred through the country lanes and cross-roads, through wood-paths and hill trails, far into the hours of darkness, till my mount was weary. Then I turned back and came in again to make such amends as I might to the boy whom I had meant only to help and whom I had dealt such an unlucky wound.

I found that Graham had been at the house when I got back. He had approved what the other doctor had done and Hal still slept under the influence of the drug, or in natural slumber following upon its quieting effects. I was a little comforted by this.

King, too, had gone, and Donna and Aunt Charlotte were kind, each offering more friendliness than I had expected. Indeed, Donna seemed sorry for me with all her concern for her brother; and it was in her willingness that we should all leave the subject for the time that she reminded me of the thing

of which we had talked in the morning and her idea was wholesome for us all.

"Aileen promised to be back at ten this evening," she said. "Do you want to question her?"

"Aileen?" said I, not recalling the girl for a moment.

"The maid in whose room this plan of the grounds was found," she said, bringing to me the paper which I had seen earlier.

The memory brought me back to a plan I had formed in the early portion of the day.

I looked at my watch. I had been late returning after my ride. It was nine-thirty now.

"Wouldn't it be well to put this thing back where it was found," I suggested, "and then wait opportunity to question or watch the girl?"

"Yes," assented Donna quickly. She went to the bell-push by the wide library hearth and rang for the housekeeper. Presently that quiet competent Englishwoman came to the door. Donna gave her the paper slip at once.

"Mrs. Griggs, please put this where you and Auntie found it this morning—quickly, before the girl comes in. Let us know what time she comes, and, if you can, see whether she comes alone."

"I'd have to go to the gate and watch to know that, Miss Donna. The maids don't bring their friends inside the grounds."

"Oh," said Donna. She looked at me for a fresh suggestion.

"Don't rouse her suspicions that we are watching her," I said. "Let's think of some other way." I rose, reached my hand for the sheet the housekeeper now held and looked at it narrowly again. Donna came to my side and looked also. "Are there any peculiar marks on it?" I asked.

She shook her head. "There's a little cross there by the small side gate back of the garage. But that's the servants' gate."

I looked the plan over. It was easy to trace out the paths from my own familiarity with them when I knew what the thing was. There was not a mark upon them that would serve to indicate the maker's special interest in any one point except the servants' gate. I gave the little slip back to the housekeeper.

"Is she usually prompt in getting home?" I asked the woman.

"Very," responded Mrs. Griggs.

"All right," I said. "Just let us know whether she is to-night. Is she the only girl out this evening?"

"One other, sir."

"What does Aileen look like?"

"She's very tall and wears a gray suit, sir."

"And the other maid that's out?"

"Is small. She wears brown and I think she only had a shawl over her head to-night."

"I see." The housekeeper retired. "Not much of a clue," I commented, rather disposed to think we were making much of little. "But it's a curious

coincidence that we should find just this sort of a paper in the girl's possession just at this time. I think, Miss Philbric, I'll just take a stroll till ten o'clock or so and see who comes home, and how."

The ladies approved and I took hat and gloves and stepped out by the front door and through the veranda. The weather was consistently mild and balmy and it was past the time to think of overcoats.

It was a moonless but very clear night. The air was full of the sweet smell of damp earth and growing things. There was plenty of spice of interest in any possible opportunity for gathering clues. Besides, I wished to think alone and I was glad of a bit of time by myself.

I walked slowly down along the new grass by the side of the well remembered drive to the main gate of the grounds which gave upon the public road. In the soft darkness under the swaying branches of the budding trees the place seemed familiar enough, and I had little difficulty in keeping to the edge of the drive. I had small notion that my present quest would give results but it was the one thing that offered to-night. The strange incident of the anonymous letters held me to the idea of seeing the girl as a thing that should not be neglected. It was not the least of our problems.

I found shadow enough at the side of the gray road when I passed the gates, and by keeping on the grass near the trees of the grounds I was well hidden from any casual observance. The road was

very still, as country roads are apt to be, at such an hour. In both directions it stretched away dimly to lose itself among the trees. Toward the town there were the lights of a house or two. In the other direction all the countryside was lost in that gloom that only still fields can have under a night sky. The cross-road which passed the side of our place was quite as gray and lonely. It was not as wide as the main road nor as smooth. The latter was much traveled by automobiles of country-dwellers, and was well kept. The cross-road was a less important highway.

I turned at the corner of the high fence that surrounded the immediate house grounds and made my way slowly along toward the side gate. I was confident that if any one came along the road it would be impossible for me not to see and hear them. There was almost complete silence upon the whole of our little part of the world. Only those faint, distant, vague sounds that come across wide open areas in darkness reached my ears. It was too early for frogs and crickets. The immediate neighborhood was absolutely still.

Despite my errand I was wholly unprepared for adventure. I anticipated none. To watch a girl come down the public road possibly attended by a swain, and to get a look at that swain, was the limit of my expectation. But as I came near to the gate of the servants and was looking for a particularly deep shadow in which to take my stand, a sound

came from within the grounds themselves that instantly warned me that some one else beside housemaids was abroad.

There was a slight scuffling of feet on the path within the fence, just at the gate's side, and probably a dozen feet from where I stood. Then there was a soft brushing of bushes nearer, and presently, almost before I could set myself in poise for quiet, some human being whose steps I could not hear on the sod, but whose very breathing was audible, was creeping toward me on the other side of the fence.

Naturally I stood still. The fine excitement of the thing rose with a rush like an intoxicant to heat my brain. I felt that a real game was afoot after all, for there was no mistaking the stealthiness of the feet that crept along those palings. The leaves slipped and rustled against the pushing figure almost in arm's length before I saw it and then, when it came into view, a black humped-up shapeless shadow, I could not have told whether it was man or woman or beast, that stopped suddenly as still as I and stood with every motion and every sound stilled.

But I was not left long in doubt, at least as to what sort of being I faced, for a gruff grunt suddenly apprised me that a human, and a startled one, had abruptly become aware of me.

"Humph!" That was what it sounded like. Then suddenly a whisper, "Dad."

I answered on the impulse of the instant. "Yes," I whispered back, peering and striving to see between the iron palings.

The figure inside did not move for a moment. Then slowly spoke out. "Well, who in——"

He stopped. Suddenly he turned in the bushes and made a rush back the way he had come. Instantly I ran to the gate and burst in. I plainly heard for a moment the beat of feet on the path ahead. Then again I heard the smashing of the shrubbery as my quarry broke through, and this time I caught the direction better.

Quickly divining that the runner was making for the front gates I came to the conclusion that I could far better turn back to the road and make my run around in the open highway, than to attempt to follow through the trees. I might arrive in front of the grounds in time for a glimpse, at least, of the fugitive. I followed the impulse and ran with all my speed for the main road. I came to the corner and was swinging round it when without warning another running figure came like a rushing madman out of the darkness and crashed into me. Next instant I was sprawling in the damp grass of the roadside trying desperately to regain command of my lost equilibrium and to get a grip on the wind that was very nearly knocked out of me. Before I could recover, however, I heard the sound of feet in the road and when I managed to roll to a sitting posture I saw a dark figure for a moment

against the sky as it crossed the highway. Almost instantly it sank down below the horizon line, however, and disappeared in the heavy, blurred shadow of the old corn-field opposite.

I got to my feet slowly after my fall. I was bruised. Whoever the man was who had run into me he was a solid chunk of a fellow. I am something of an athlete myself. Old college friends still called me "Bim," a nickname tacked upon me in football days for the very sort of rough and tumble that should stand me in good stead on an occasion of such an encounter. But I had been taken unawares and the fellow had been running lower than I. He had evidently been less jarred than I had.

I picked myself up somewhat sorely. I was still on the outlook, however, for I believed that the man who had run into me was not the one I had followed. As I got the persistent luminaries out of my vision I discovered promptly, therefore, that some one was standing in the main road at about the point where the gates opened upon it. Looking closely I saw that it was a woman who had stopped still there evidently alarmed and listening. I stepped out into the road and called to her.

"Did you see those men run?"

She remained motionless, regarding me for an instant. Then presently she came slowly along the road toward me. As soon as she was close enough for me to see her distinctly I became sure that she

was the maid, Aileen. She seemed to have just come up the road from the village, too, and her first question was such as might disarm suspicion. She knew me, though I would not have known her but for her height and the gray costume Mrs. Griggs had described.

"Is anything wrong at the house, sir?" she asked.

"No, nothing new," I answered. "I trust not, at least. I've just had an adventure out here with a couple of prowlers, however. Did you see them?"

"No, sir, I saw nothing," she replied frankly. She spoke excellent English and I should not have known her nationality from any accent.

"Have you seen any men who do not belong to the place hanging about lately?" I questioned, taking advantage of my unexpected opportunity.

"Why, no, sir," she answered easily.

"Anybody from town been coming to the house who doesn't usually come?"

"Not as I know of, sir."

I nodded. I had lost my hat in the fall of a moment before. I turned to look for it to give my questions as casual a sound as possible. I was conscious that they were not very clever questions and would not lead to much. Still, the girl's open manner was something to observe.

I lighted a match and returned to the dark strip of shadow by the fence. She followed me and aided in the search for the hat. The latter was

easily located, however, and I turned again presently and walked back to the road.

"All alone?" I asked the girl.

"Yes, sir," she replied.

"Do you often walk alone on the road when you are out late?"

"Yes, sir," she answered. "I am not afraid."

"I suppose you are perfectly familiar with all the roads from here to town."

She laughed lightly. "It's only a mile, sir."

"For my part," I said, "I need a plan of the very grounds, I guess. I've been looking one over to-night."

"A plan of the grounds?" she repeated.

"Yes," said I, waiting to hear the nature of her comment.

"Is there one at the house, sir?" she queried innocently.

"You don't suppose grounds like these are laid out without a plan, do you?" I asked.

"Oh no," she said. "I suppose there is a landscape gardener's plan."

"And you never saw it?" I asked.

"Why, no."

She was either entirely innocent of any notion of what the paper was that had been discovered in her possession or she was clever enough to make this appearance of ignorance very plausible. I brushed my presumably soiled clothing and laughed.

"Well," I said, "I'm sorry we startled you. I

think we'll have to have an officer or a good stout groom or two on night duty about here. Good-night."

She went on around the corner to the side gate. I heard the gate click after her as I made my way slowly toward the main drive. Presently I also heard the side door of the house close. When I entered the front door a moment later Mrs. Griggs was already in the hall at the library door reporting that the maid was in.

There was a general exclamation when I showed myself in the light of the library lamps but I told my brief story quickly. I saw Donna's eyes fill with apprehension for my safety that was flattering enough as I related the tale of my absurd discomfiture, and I saw the amazement of good Aunt Charlotte and of Mrs. Griggs.

We had learned but one thing, however, and that was only in the way of confirmation of what King had already discovered. We were watched. I might better say we were spied upon. And the natural conclusion was that some one of these spies was either getting into the house or operating in the house through some unfaithful servant. It might be the girl Aileen or it might be some other.

Old John sent two stout fellows to patrol the grounds. That was the only immediate action we could take, it seemed, and we all decided to turn in quietly. I said good-night to the ladies and went to my room. As I was drawing my shades, how-

ever, I heard a startingly sudden rap at my door and opened to see Donna standing there, her face white with wild alarm.

“Hal!” she gasped when I started forward to support her. “Hal—is asleep still. But look—look what they’ve done now!”

Her hands were shaking but she pressed into mine another sheet with red lines and letters upon it, and I knew without looking for details all that it meant.

“Another red letter?”

“Yes—pinned on his very breast as he sat in his chair by the window.”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ODOR OF EVIDENCE

“**D**ID he see it?” I asked, as I took the thing from her.

“No—thank God. He hasn’t waked.”

“Where is Aileen?”

“In her room. Mrs. Griggs is having her watched.”

“Are you sure?”

“She promised.”

I opened the paper and looked at it. It was like the rest of these missives in that it was unsigned, but it bore no picture this time. The few words it contained, however, could not have been better calculated to strike fresh terror to our boy’s heart on this night had he chanced to see them.

“Your friends know it now. They don’t say so but they know. Look at them and see.”

The thing needs no comment. It received little from me. I went out into the hall.

“Come and let’s find out whether Mrs. Griggs has kept her promise,” I said.

We went down the stairs together. Donna led

the way to the housekeeper's room and called Mrs. Griggs to her door.

"Did you watch Aileen?" I asked the surprised woman when she obeyed my suggestion that she step out into the hall. I had heard voices in her room.

"Yes," she answered quickly. "She is in my room now."

"Has she been to her own room?"

"Yes, but I watched her door till she came back to me."

"And she hasn't been out of your sight?"

"No, sir."

I held out the new "red letter" for her to see. "It was pinned on Hal's breast as he lay in his chair asleep some time this evening," I told her.

"Then Aileen did not do it," she answered quietly enough, though her eyes opened wide with astonishment.

"Apparently not," said I. "But things are getting too mysterious around us here to believe anything we merely see or hear."

"What shall we do?" questioned Donna helplessly.

"We'll stop this sort of thing effectually for tonight," I said. "I'll go back myself and sit in Hal's room. Mrs. Griggs, you need not watch the girl longer. She's not guilty."

We went to the library, Donna and I. She turned

on the lights and I stirred the fire again. It was not yet midnight.

"Now, Miss Philbric," I said, "this thing has got to stop. Hal's suffered enough. I want you to let me take him away secretly—now, before these enemies of ours can make another move. We've got to run away from them. Hal simply can't stand it. What happened to-day merely proves that. And the things they will do to him if he tries to face a test of his sanity will be too much for him. Will you agree?"

"That you run away with him?" she breathed.

"Yes. I'll take care of him and hide him. We'll camp in the mountains somewhere—far enough away so that they can't find us; and then you and King and Barnaby can stave these fellows off till Hal gets strong."

"But that will take months."

"Just so—perhaps. I think weeks will do it—say six weeks."

"Could he get back to health in six weeks?"

"He could get back nerve enough to go and have a proper sort of examination made in a way that wouldn't hurt him. We could have a doctor or two join us without Hal's knowing who they are and get their opinions on his sanity."

The tears were in her eyes and wet upon her cheeks now. "Oh, you are so good," she said.

"I'm not. I'm fighting mad. I'd like to be out

in the thick of some sort of fray where I could face the instigators of this game again."

"You've suffered already."

"Yes, and I'm very willing to strike back. But I can't do better for all of us than to take Hal away."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

"Will he go?"

"He says not. You must persuade him."

"Perhaps I can't."

"You must."

She stood with the light of the fire thrown up upon her face, one slim foot on the hearth, her hands folded before her, the picture of unconsciousness of her beautiful self. Gentle, loving, anxious, she was lovely and lovable beyond compare. I longed to serve her and to relieve her unhappiness. Even with the sense upon me that her love could not be for me, I longed to serve for the sake of the serving.

"We will sleep upon it then," she said. "I'll try, if you and Bob think it right."

"Perhaps King won't like the idea."

"He has urged it, too."

The notion stung, but I answered promptly. "Then you are convinced of the wisdom of it."

"I think you two men must know," she answered.

We left the library again and went up the stairs

together. At the top she turned toward her room.

"Please make yourself comfortable if you stay in Hal's room," she said.

I saw that the idea comforted her. "I will," I answered. "Good-night."

She held out her hand and I took it and pressed it, dumbly.

"Good-night, Dan Randall," she said with just a flicker of a smile.

I went directly to Hal's room. A night-light burned there. I pulled a steamer rug and pillow from the couch and threw them down behind the closed door, then lay down with the certainty that no human being could pass that way without waking me. And I slept.

Hal was still asleep when I woke some time after daylight. I went and stood by him and listened to his light breathing. I was hopeful that the long quiet rest might have done him good. It seemed to me quite safe now to leave him and go to my own room to shave and dress for the day, and I did so accordingly.

The house was very still and I found it was only six o'clock as I looked at my watch in the hall. I went to my own room and pushed open the door, which I found closed. The moment I entered, I became instantly conscious of the smell of stale cigarettes again. I looked about and could see nothing wrong or unusual in my room. I thought about the matter as I prepared for my bath.

This was quite as curious as the other strange happenings. It looked very much as if some one were making free of my room when I was out of it, and the natural thing was to try to establish connection between this fact and the outrages that had been perpetrated upon Hal. Could my room be the path by which some one entered the upper portion of the house and so reached the boy's room? If so, how did such person enter my room? Through the locked door? I went and tried it. It had apparently remained locked all the time. Why should any one enter my room at all, unless compelled to do so? And yet, what did the odor of cigarettes indicate if not that some one had been there?

My windows were not open this morning. I opened them and breathed the sweet air, and looked upon the trees and lawns with eyes that saw apparently for the first time in days. How the buds had grown and burst and the tender leaves had spread since the day of the snow! How the grass had grown! How spring had advanced! And then the faint little whiff of stale cigarette smoke came to my nostrils as the counter draft sucked out of the room past me.

I went to my bath. Then I shaved and dressed. I had finished and was just about to go out into the hall and to Hal's room again when a rap sounded again at my door, and this time I opened to Mrs. Griggs.

"Didn't you stay in Mr. Hal's room last night, sir?" she asked.

"Yes," said I. "I did."

She held out to me a slip of paper with red marks on it, and I read it quickly.

"To-day is the Day."

"It was on the door of Mr. Hal's room just now, sir," said the woman.

"Inside?" I asked.

"No, sir; outside."

I stared at the thing. Had it been there when I came out of the room? I could not tell. It was quite possible.

"Has any one else seen this?" I asked.

"Not that I know of, sir."

"Keep quiet about it," I told her.

"Yes, sir."

I ran downstairs and found old John in the hall.

"John," I said, "is there anything peculiar about the construction of this house that you haven't told me?"

"What do you mean, sir?" asked the man, staring.

"Any secret passages?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"Did your men patrol the grounds?"

"Yes, sir."

"No alarm?"

"Not a bit."

"Do you smoke cigarettes?"

He stared at me. "I, sir?"

"Yes, you."

"No, sir; I hope not, sir."

"Good. Does anybody around the place?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"Stable-boys?"

"Oh, I suppose so, sir."

"Do they ever come to the house?"

"The kitchen sometimes, Mr. Randall."

"Is there any man or boy who comes here to the house, regularly or irregularly or occasionally—or habitually—who smokes cigarettes?"

"I can't say, sir."

I showed him the note from Hal's door. As he read it Donna came suddenly upon us from the dining-room. I was not quick enough to recover the thing from him before she saw it.

"Another?" she asked, turning pale.

"Yes."

"Hal?"

"No, Hal hasn't seen it?"

"Where was it?"

"On the outside of his door. I slept on the floor just inside of that door all night."

The girl read the message, which I did not try to keep from her? "To-day?" she repeated, looking up at me.

"Yes. Does that convince you that my suggestion of last night is a good one?"

She looked at me oddly, a trifle less frankly than she had.

"I don't know," she said. "Will you wait till Bob comes?"

"Of course," said I. I was cut to the quick, but I turned to John.

"John, there's mystery in this house and I want to make another search. Will you help me?"

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir," answered the old man.

"May I go over every inch of the place, Miss Philbric?" I asked.

"Indeed you may," she said more cordially.

"I'll go and talk to our patrols then first," I said. "John, I'll want you in, say, half an hour."

I took a cap from the tree in the hall and went out as Donna started up the stairs. I was not ceremonious with her. I could not be at the moment, for I was unreasonably, unreasoningly hurt. But as I stepped out into the porch I looked back at her, thinking to have a glimpse of her as she went up to her brother. To my surprise she stood still at the foot of the flight, leaning against the newel-post and looking after me with an expression that was hard to read but that did not seem unfriendly.

I stopped and turned. But suddenly her eyes fell and the color mounted quickly in her face. As quickly as I noted it I paused, and then in a moment she had turned and was running swiftly up the stairs.

I went on and out, puzzled but stirred strangely. What did such a look mean? Did it mean that I had been less than kind and had hurt her, or did it mean that there was less of real confidence in me in her heart than she wanted me to think? I could not unriddle it.

I found the men for whom John had told me to ask at the stables. Mabley and Foyle were their names and they were two decent, competent, honest-looking chaps.

"Any alarm, boys?" I asked them.

"No, sir," answered Foyle respectfully.

"No sign of one?"

"No, sir."

"Nobody come about?"

"Not a soul, sir."

"Hear anything?"

"Nothing worth mentioning, sir."

"What did you hear?"

"Well, it's hardly worth tellin', sir. But we heard the servants' gate click at about 5:30, sir. That's all."

"That's all! Didn't you investigate?"

"Yes, sir, we did. But nothing could we find."

"Could the wind have clicked the gate?"

"There was no wind last night, sir."

"And you heard nothing else before or after?"

"No, sir."

"Where were you when you heard the sound?"

"I was on the path near the east door, sir, and

Mabley was in the shrubbery near the front gate."

"Did you both hear the noise?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you do?"

"We ran to the gate and then we looked all around inside and outside the grounds."

"And found nothing?"

"Nothing at all, sir. It was one on us."

"It isn't much, is it?" said I, smiling.

They laughed. "No, sir," said Foyle. "We'll keep an eye out to-night, though, also."

I left them and went around to the gate they mentioned. It was the spot where my adventure of the evening before had commenced. As I reached the place I heard an automobile coming into the front gate and I paused to watch through the trees. It was only seven o'clock now and early for visitors. But I saw King jump from his car and go into the house.

I went to the servants' gate then and began to examine it. I tested its spring and latch. I opened it and let it swing together with its click. I remembered that I myself had heard the sound from the front road when I had waited for the maid Aileen to enter the house. It would be easy for any one to hear it in any part of the grounds. But why should any person who was prowling about, allow the gate to click when in every other way he was apparently quite undetected?

But as I bent down to examine the hinges my

eyes fell on something in the path that gave me a curious sensation, commonplace as the thing was or might be, under most circumstances. There on the gravel lay a half-smoked cigarette, its paper fresh and clean and neither damped nor stained by lying out. It had evidently fallen there within a very few hours at the most.

I picked it up. It was one of the round cheap variety but it bore a portion of a name on the unburned length. The letters *i n o* remained. The rest had been smoked away. It was a poor clue certainly and might not be a clue at all, but I was too fresh from the cigarette-smell in my room to let this escape me.

CHAPTER XIX

A SLEEPING POTION

I PUT the thing in my pocket and walked back to the stables. It occurred to me that it would be a good plan to find out if possible what the brand of cigarettes might be, and then to watch for the smoker who used them. If he were our prowler he must indeed be addicted to the habit to be forced to smoke when on such errands as brought him here—or he was a strangely cool hand.

As I neared the stables it chanced that the man Mabley was just leading out a horse with single carriage.

“Anything I can do for you up to town, sir?” he asked as he saw me.

I suddenly decided to find out about my cigarette at once.

“Yes,” said I, “take me with you.”

“All right, sir,” he answered.

In two minutes we were on the way. It was but a mile to the village and I could go quickly and not be missed from the house. Also it gave me an opportunity to ask Mabley if he knew cigarette-smokers among the men or boys about the place or

who came about. He did not, however. He said he had not noticed.

At the village main street I was set down and I entered the first tobacco store I found. The clerk there identified my cigarette stub quickly as from the kind sold under the dulcet name of Peacherino, and I purchased a box. I was walking back to The Hazels within twenty minutes from the time I started, and I had nearly reached the place when, as I neared the cross-road, I saw an automobile coming at a high pace down the main road toward me from the direction in which I was heading.

I was walking in the path at the roadside and watched to see the car pass me, when, as the machine neared the cross-road, it slowed down abruptly, made a skidding turn and was off down the cross-road. And in the turn I recognized the people in the car, for the distance was not greater than a hundred yards. The man driving was King and the girl beside him was unquestionably Donna Philbric.

It was a surprise. It was still early in the morning for pleasure riding, and more than that, there had hardly been the spirit for such an outing evident in the face of the girl when I had seen her last. The sudden fear that something was wrong at the house came to start me running on the path with a half-panicky notion that I had been absent when some new matter of moment had come to pass. And in five minutes I was in

the porch and old John Kent was letting me in.

"What is it, John?" I asked, without preliminary.

"I saw King and Miss Philbric on the road."

"They've gone up to town, sir, to see the judge," answered the old man. He was much excited.

"The judge!"

"Yes, sir. Mr. King, sir, brought the news that they were going to—to send the officers after Mr. Hal to-day. And Miss Donna's gone—to plead, sir."

"To plead!"

"Yes, sir."

"But they turned off the town road, John," objected I, mystified.

"Did they, sir?"

"Yes, at the first turn."

"I don't know, sir. I don't understand. They were going to town."

"Well," said I, "never mind. King ought to know. Has Hal gotten up?"

"Yes, sir."

"Does he know?"

"Yes, sir—worse luck."

"Worse luck, eh? Is he cut up?"

"Very much so, sir."

"I'll go up and see him," said I.

My mind was filled with a multitude of swift thoughts, but one rose predominant. If Hal were threatened with arrest it might be a time for quick action indeed. I ran up the steps as fast as I could

make the jumps. At the top I nearly ran over Aunt Charlotte.

"Oh, Mr. Randall!" she exclaimed. "I'm glad you've come. I've had a dreadful time."

Aunt Charlotte was nervous. I did not heed her much. I pushed for Hal's room.

"Sh-sh-sh!" she whispered, catching my arm. "I've just given him another sleeping potion to quiet him. He woke up nervous and half distracted and the news that the men were coming drove him nearly wild."

I stopped and looked at her a bit alarmed. Another sleeping potion? Well, perhaps that wasn't a bad idea. Surely it wouldn't hurt him as much as suspense. I said so doubtfully.

"I had to trick him into taking it," she said. "I knew he wouldn't if he understood what it was. He was about wild."

I turned back from the boy's door. "And King and Miss Philbric went to stop the officers?" I asked.

"Yes—oh yes—if they can," she answered.

"What chance had they?"

"I can't see that they had any. But Donna was determined."

I looked at the fluttered little woman. "Well," I said. "I guess the best thing we can do is not to disturb Hal. Let him sleep again."

I went down the stairs with her, but I was thinking not of what she had answered me nor of what

else I might find to say. I was thinking what I would do if word came that Donna and King had made a failure of their enterprise. And I could not believe that there could be anything else but failure ahead for them.

I excused myself from Aunt Charlotte and went out again. A scheme was revolving in my brain to the considerable heating of it. I went to the garage and found Hal's chauffeur there. The man knew me by sight now, though I had not talked to him, and I liked his appearance. He looked more like a substantial country boy than the city man.

"Mr. Philbric thinks of letting me take him for a spin in the car this morning," said I. "What are your cars?"

He told me. As a matter of fact I already knew, for I had taken pains to discover what were the two motors the Philbrics kept in their garage. I was familiar with the handling of both, for I had manipulated not a few machines. "Good," said I. "How soon can you have the big one ready?"

"Twenty minutes, sir," he said.

"Well," I answered. "I may want it very quickly when I want it."

I looked at him hard. He looked sound to me, and his glance did not waver under mine.

"All right, sir," he answered.

"You are familiar with the trouble at the house, of course?" said I.

"Yes, sir."

“Then don’t say anything about it but have that car ready for use at a minute’s notice and keep it so, and you will do more for Hal, and, incidentally, for me, than in any other way.”

“I’ll do it,” he promised, and I believed him.

I went back to the house. I was more than half of the opinion that we would have to face our crisis that morning, and the will to fight hardened in me—to fight by running. I would carry Hal off whether he would or no, if the alarm came, and I set old John and young Foyle to watch the road for signs that might precede word from King and Donna.

I met no one in the halls. John was out on watch and Aunt Charlotte had gone somewhere into the realms of the kitchen. I stole up to Hal’s room and opened the door. Over the back of the big chair by the wide open window I could see the top of the red-and-white knit skating-cap he wore when he sat in the open air. I went quietly to his side and looked down at his face. His eyes were closed and the pallor about his lips was more pronounced than before. As I looked at him now, too, his amazing likeness to his sister, which seemed to have grown nearly absolute in these days when his suffering had given him almost an ethereal look, impressed me more than ever, and I looked at him with a queer sense that it would be easy indeed to make me believe that it was the sleeping face of the girl herself I looked upon. I wondered at the delicate

beauty of the lines of mouth and chin, at the straight brows and long dark lashes that lay quite still.

It was a bit startling to see how quiet he was. I felt for his wrist and tested his pulse. It was steady and full and seemed approximately normal, but, poor chap, I pitied him deeply as I felt the slightness of his hand and thought of what all these events must mean to him in suffering and of how brave and patient he had been.

I went to my own room and threw off the coat I had been wearing. Drawing on a heavier one I slipped my cap into the pocket and went downstairs. I felt that I was doing all that I had a right to do and I would not go further without Donna's approval unless emergency pressed. I went into the library and sat down to wait for a message from King, expecting one fully. The fire was burning on the hearth as usual in careful preparation for Hal's comfort when he should come down, and I watched the tiny curling flames behind the grate with an odd feeling that they were live entities that had been present here through all this week of wild happenings and that they alone held the secret which, if they could tell, would suddenly solve our mystery and remove the threat that was now imminent. Why should such things happen? How could so strange and unsolvable a matter come upon lives as peaceful and quiet and inoffensive as those of this boy and girl? And why should an inscrutable fortune, or providence, have brought my life to

touch theirs just at this point? Surely, though, there was an answer to this last. It would be a pity if my chance coming were not to help them.

I was sitting staring at the fire and dreaming over all the events that had followed upon that slightest of happenings, the delay of the train, which had commenced it all for me, when I suddenly became conscious of running feet on the veranda outside and then in the hall, and, by the time I was up and at the door, old John, his face distorted with anxiety, was facing me.

"They've come!" he gasped.

"Who?" I asked, half reassured. "Is it King and Miss Donna?"

"My God, no!" he cried. "It's the sheriff and two deputies. They're driving in now. I saw them from the corner of the fence."

He was trembling. I reached out and took hold of his arms.

"John," I said, "I'm going to run away with Hal—if they are after him. Understand? I'm going to his room now and shall take him down the back way to the garage. Send me word there what they say."

I turned and sprang up the stairs. I felt no hesitation now. I was ready to fight the officers themselves, if need be, to take the boy away from the thing he would have to face if they served their warrant. At Hal's door I stopped to listen and heard voices outside in the drive. Some parley was going

on. I entered the room softly and went to the boy's side. He was still sleeping quietly.

"Hal," I whispered, shaking his shoulder gently.

He did not stir.

"Hal!" I was a bit more vigorous.

He lay perfectly still, his regular breathing undisturbed. I hesitated. If I should waken him roughly it was possible that he might not have full control of his nerves. Perhaps—perhaps this was luck—this sleep. I looked down at his face, the gentleness of which now made my heart go out to him anew. Dear old chap! He had taken to me and trusted me to stand by him. I would, and——

Suddenly I heard the slam of a door downstairs. I stooped on the instant, slipped one hand behind his shoulders and the other under his knees, and lifted him, bundled as he was in great coat and robe. Then I turned, kicked open the door and strode down the hall to the back stairway.

The weight of my burden was slight to me. I could have carried twice the avoirdupois easily. So it was no trick to make my descent to the small hall from which opened a door to the garage path. I moved with some care but I was not slow, and I had reached the door itself when suddenly, through a doorway on my left, some one came swiftly out. I turned and faced with astonishment the French maid, Aileen.

I have no doubt I stared at her with full evidence written on my face that I considered this a

mischance. She certainly stared at me. But I recovered quickly.

"Don't make a noise," I said. "Open the door and let me out."

She moved instantly to obey. In another second I was in the path between the bushes and on my way to the garage, and I am free to say I ran. What this maid might do, how far her loyalty extended or what was her allegiance, were open questions. She might give an alarm as quickly as she understood what was going on. She might be faithful. Somehow I hoped for the latter.

At the small door of the garage I found the chauffeur. I did not know his name but I knew his kind, when he stepped back, held open the door and spoke swiftly.

"It's ready, sir," he said. "This one!" He indicated the big blue car nearer to us. "Shall I start the engine or open the back gate first?"

"Man, you're a trump!" said I, with gratitude real indeed. "Open the gate first. It is on the lane, is it not?"

"Yes, sir. And the lane leads to the side road," he answered.

He did not pause for more but ran out and away, while I lifted the quiet little sleeper in my arms and deposited him in the deep cushions of the tonneau. Then I stood still and listened an instant. No sounds came in to me. I pulled blankets, wool and rubber from the shelves behind the machine and

covered the boy as he lay prone in the big rear seat. He would be quite hidden from view of people on the road as he lay there, and I liked that. Yes, it was luck, this sleep! Then I went to the big doors before the machine and found them unbarred and ready to push open.

I had turned back and was standing by the motor's crank only waiting the return of the chauffeur to crank up, when suddenly the silence was broken. A long, wild, piercing scream—a woman's scream—rang out across the lawns, evidently from the house, and cry on cry followed it.

“Help! Oh help! Quick, quick! Here he is! Here! He's getting away!”

CHAPTER XX

WITH CHANCE AS PILOT

I COULD think of but one thing. It was the maid I had left at the little door. Why she should have waited till now to give alarm I did not know, but alarm she was giving without a doubt.

I turned instantly and pushed the big garage door back. Then with one swift lucky turn I cranked the big machine. Next moment I was at the wheel and was feeling the car start beautifully under my touch. And out I went into the drive. I did not even glance toward the house. I looked only for the path and the gate at the rear, and the heavy tires of my machine sent the gravel flying against the front of the garage as I gave the motor all the head I dared. And when I spied the lane gate round the first turn my man was there holding it open for me.

The machine was in excellent condition and ran with absolute smoothness. As I turned into the narrow lane I heard shouts raised behind me, but they were at some distance and I felt sure I had not yet been seen. I ran the car down to the cross-road and turned to the right, away from the house; and pres-

ently we were flying off between the fields which had yet the morning dew upon them, and that were sweet with fresh scents of morning.

I looked back upon an empty road when the free running gave me an opportunity. Despite the alarm my start seemed to have been good. I advanced my spark, however, and let the car do its prettiest on the straight smooth course for two unbroken miles. Then I slowed, turned east into a better highway and began to consider what to do.

We were fugitives from the law, Hal and I—a cruel, pitiless law it seemed to me, from which we had no choice but to run away in search of safety and justice. We were outlaws in a sense, and in that sense every man would be our enemy. Search there would be, widespread and immediate. No means would be neglected to send the alarm far and near. The chances of escape lay only in swiftness now at the start and in an early change of the car for other conveyance, or a plunge into the mountain wilderness itself. It was the latter I had in mind.

I was not certain whether or not it was fortunate that the day was less bright and sunny than those immediately preceding it had been. There was a look of threatening rain in the sky and the smell of it in the air. A storm might be an advantage if we could get a good start, for a heavy rain would make it less easy to stir the people of the countryside to look for us. Also, a heavy rain

would make good roads bad very quickly and seriously handicap us.

I had almost no knowledge of the country, too, with but the railroad rides through the foothills and one night gallop to give me acquaintance. But I knew the general direction of the mountains and I could make for them. Once on the edge of the wild country I hoped to find means to make pursuit difficult, for I was no novice in the woods.

I had met no one on the first two miles of road. I began to meet farmers driving toward town on the larger highway. I could not see that they regarded me with any special attention. The friendly nod that most country-dwellers usually give to the stranger—even the stranger in the motor car—was a common greeting as I sped by or slowed my machine for a skittish horse. And so I put another two or three miles behind us. I thought best, as we neared a small cross-roads town I did not know, to turn off to the left again and pass it. It was too near Hazelhurst for comfort. So I rounded the place and scudded on toward the growing blue haze of the hills.

I met children on their way to school, with their lunch baskets and books, and realized how very early it still was. To me it seemed hours since I had taken my ride to town with Mabley. It was not much more than an hour. Some of the little people cried out to me to give them a ride, but I had to shake my head at them and run on. I suppose the big,

apparently empty tonneau tempted the small boys.

As minutes stretched into quarter- and half-hours I began to lose my tense excitement. I stopped once and got out to look well to my charge, and I found him sleeping on and on in perfect comfort and undisturbed quiet. And it seemed almost a joke, this kidnapping of him, as I anticipated his surprise when he should wake. He was certainly none the worse for this ride, for the car could hardly be less comfortable on these roads than his very bed at home. I covered him carefully, for the air was slightly cooler than it had been yesterday, and then I mounted to my place again and sped on.

The hills crept nearer to us. That was how it looked, at least, as I kept the nose of the big machine pointed ever toward what seemed their nearest point and held as fast a pace as I dared, with my sleeping boy to look out for. How long it might be safe to run the car openly on the road I did not know, but I took mile after mile, as it were, from the hand of fortune, and added it to the distance between us and our enemies.

But if we were succeeding in running away from the men who had come to look for Hal at The Hazels, we were surely running into the coming storm, as became apparent after a time. The wind freshened in my face and grew cooler and quite damp. The clouds were blackening about the mountain-tops, now visible away back in behind the nearer hills, which had hidden them from my view in the

valley. Thunder rumbled off there in the crags and above the dark woods, like a moody grumbling of the hills themselves, at our very coming. I felt some apprehension as to the effect of a severe storm on Hal, as it became more and more evident that the storm would be severe when it broke. I could keep him from getting seriously wet, perhaps, though the car was an open one and I had only the rubber blankets to shield him. But I feared his waking to a thunder crack and in a strange situation.

I stopped again, decided to waken him at once and explain to him; but I found that the drug had him still in its velvet grip and I could not rouse him without greater roughness than I chose to use. I felt a touch of anxiety about the effect of such a dose as the aunt had given him, especially following the one of the night before—but his pulse was still regular and good, and I felt some relief in the lessening of my problem by the elimination of the need for immediate explanation of the situation. So I drove on and on, up the gradually rising ground into the hill-roads and into the face of the gathering storm.

The way was rather blind to me, but I had followed each road that looked best and that led west, ever westward, toward the high ground. But I had passed no more towns. Once I saw a village at a distance to the south but did not go near it. It was now late enough for word of our flight to have spread among the towns of our part of the state.

Indeed, when I looked at my watch I was astonished that nearly three hours had passed since we left the house. As it happened, the car's speedometer had not been freshly set, and so I had no means of judging how far I had come. I had let the motor fly on smooth and level roads and had cut down only as much as seemed absolutely necessary in those that were less favorable. I knew I had covered considerable distance, and it seemed that I might safely conclude that I had averaged twenty-five miles an hour. The nearness of the mountains confirmed this notion. Where I was, so far as exact location was concerned, was a matter of complete uncertainty. If I should even enter a town I would not know what town it might be till I could inquire.

But I had not thought I could miss a plain road. How I happened to do it I do not know. I think I chose wrong at a fork—though wrong perhaps I should not call it now. At any rate, I did drive at last into what I supposed was a highway, but which turned out to be a blind path that slowly and surely dwindled into a weed-grown trackless lane, and then came to an end at last on the top of a low hill and in the edge of the woods. I crossed a bridge over a considerable stream that had cut a deep gully in the hillside, just before I found that I was in a cul-de-sac, as it were, and this fact puzzled me. But I had the strongest aversion to turning back.

I got out of the car and made a quick survey of the ground. The thing was worse than annoying; it was almost alarming at the moment. With the woods before me there was a stretch of at least a mile behind to recover if I would turn out of this path I had chosen, and to retrace any part of our journey meant dangerous delay. It was, then, with relief and thankfulness that I discovered a cart-track among the trees, apparently leading away to some road further north that would lead up between the big hills. I had now approached, and I turned the car into, the new and rougher road, with promptness and self-congratulation.

I had not run far among the trees, however, before a freshening of the wind in their tops and some heavy spatters of rain warned me that the storm was close. I knew that I must make such preparations as I could to weather it, and decided. I began looking for a favorable place in which to stop the car and now regretted that I had come in among the trees at all. A heavy wind might make the woods a more dangerous place than the open. As I peered through the trees ahead and to the sides in the gathering gloom, I was feeling anything but joyous over the prospect, when suddenly I spied the low roof of some sort of building barely above the undergrowth, in the midst of a very thicket of brush and young trees, and I hailed the sight with delight. Anything like a shelter would be better than this exposure, and I at once took the place for

a disused sugar camp, as most of the trees about us were maples.

I turned the car out of the path and ran in among the trees as far as I could conveniently go. Then stopping my engine, I jumped out and ran to the clump of bushes. On the side toward me, it was impervious to ready penetration and I began circling. Presently I found an opening and pushed quickly in. The light was growing dimmer momentarily and the rain was beginning to fall fast. I could see little enough, but the bulk of the small house, quite dark and deserted, loomed before me. The path was not hard to follow and seemed to be well worn. I hastened to look for a door and presently I came out in a tiny four-yard-square clearing and saw that my guess at a deserted sugar-camp was doubtless correct. A moment later I had reached the door, which I could see now only as a dark cavernous opening—for it was open to the night and the storm.

I did not stop to investigate. I dared not leave Hal alone in the car longer. I turned and ran back as fast as the fading daylight would let me, rounded the thicket and stumbled to the car, with the rain beginning to beat a sharp tattoo on my shoulders and cap. Reaching the tonneau I opened the door, stepped in, and lifted my living freight, blankets, rubber covers and all, and climbed down again to the ground. Laying him on the ground for an instant I dragged out the tarpaulin and jerked it

hastily about the car. Then I raised Hal again in my arms.

I found the boy, light as he was, with all the trappings a cumbersome burden now, however, and it was something of a struggle to get him back to the house in the thicket. The thing was done, but only after what began to be a fight with the driving rain and the tugging wind. I was, indeed, half blinded by flying stuff that the gale picked up from the floor of the wood and sent hurtling around me with the water. But I made it, and staggered finally into a dark interior, which seemed to have at least the merit of being tight and dry.

I laid the boy on the ground and pulled the rubber cover away from over his head. Then I stripped off my own drenched coat and cap and turned to close the door. The wind, however, was driving from the opposite direction, and, as there seemed to be no other opening in the place, I concluded to leave the door open. I felt for my matches and found them safe and dry; but before I could strike a light, a sudden bright and blinding flash of lightning abruptly illumined the whole place, and, to my utter amaze, I recognized it as one recognizes the face of an enemy.

The whole of the interior of the small room in which I was stood out for a half second with unreal clearness. Then it was gone again in utter blackness. But the vision persisted before my eyes as if the light had not diminished. I saw walls of logs.

I saw a heavy door turned inward. On its face was a bar of oak and a bolt of steel. I saw a heap of refuse in the center of the floor that proved the place once to have been a stable for horses. I saw a little heap of straw in the corner to the right and on it a tumbled blanket and a loose bundle of clothing. I saw a heavy board roof and the very chinks at its corners showed bright in irregular streaks that seemed like erratic branchings of the lightning that illumined them. I was in the hut that had so recently been a prison for me on Cold Spring Farm. And I saw before me the heap of blankets that wrapped my companion, with the rubber gleaming wet, as glittering bright at the instant as black ice in a firelight, with the white calm face of the sleeping boy above them.

I could have cried out in sheer amazement, but the instant rush of thought upon the possible complications, the possible advantages, the astounding accident—if such guidance of chance can be so named—checked even the impulse to expression. And there I stood, with the lightning now playing in a swift flutter of flashes and the thunder coming crashing in close and fast, and looked upon this curiosity of contingencies with a mixture of feelings I can only describe as fascinated bewilderment.

CHAPTER XXI

MATCH-LIGHT

BUT a moan from Hal brought me back to action. The light in the hut was sufficient for me to see him moving under the blankets and I knew that he would wake to sharp alarm if I did not reassure him. I spoke aloud quickly.

“Hal, old man,” I said, “you’re all right. We’ve run away into the woods, that’s all; and we’ve struck a thunderstorm. You’ve been asleep.”

I struck a match as promptly as I could and held it so that it would light my own face, while I looked down at him. He lay still again now, but his eyes were wide open and staring painfully, and I could fairly feel the shock of the surprise he must be undergoing. I dropped upon my knees beside him and put my hand on his hand. He was quite dry but my hands were wet, I discovered.

“It’s Randall, Hal—Dan,” I said. “You needn’t be at all alarmed. Your aunt gave you a sleeping-potion again and I carried you off while you slumbered. We are in the foothills west of Hazelhurst and it’s raining pitchforks and screw-drivers outside. We’ve found a log hut that—that makes a fair shelter till the worst of this passes.”

I struck a fresh light and still held it close to my own face, but I had to talk loudly, for the lightning was snapping and the thunder rattling about us as if we were under fire at close range. The roar of the rain, too, was tremendous, and I understood quickly that it was a veritable cloudburst. Luck was indeed with us in one respect. We were better sheltered here than we could have been in any other place we were likely to have found. But the boy's eyes stared at me almost as if he did not know me.

I went on talking rapidly, patting his head as if he were a child. "It's nothing but a heavy hill-storm, old fellow. We're snug as can be and the car's just outside, covered—pretty well at least—with the tarpaulin. We won't drown and we can get into drier country quickly when the rain stops."

I watched his eyes. They were fastened unwinkingly on me and his face was very white. As my match-light died I thought I saw him shudder. I tucked the blankets in around him and under him by the glare of the lightning. I was distressed at his silent rigidity. Presently I bent close over him.

"How do you feel now?" I asked him. "Are you cold?"

He did not answer, and, as I could not see his face sufficiently well in the fitful flashings of the electric play, I lighted another match. He closed his eyes suddenly as the flame rose, as if he had been dazzled, but it seemed, also, to me, that his tenseness relaxed. I knelt and watched him anx-

iously for a long minute while my little stick of pine gave me the opportunity. As the light went out again I bent close to listen to his breathing. I could not hear it, but I felt warmth upon my cheek and a sudden stir of tenderness as if toward a helpless little brother took hold of me.

It was just possible, I thought, that the effect of the drug had not passed and that sleep might again overpower the boy. I hoped for that. I felt for and found the pulse in his temple and thought it high, but it did not seem seriously rapid. I got upon my feet again, uncertain what to do. There was no fireplace in the hut, so that to make a blaze would involve putting up with considerable smoke. Yet a fire would add cheer to our situation and I could hardly consider it dangerous so long as this rain lasted. No one was likely to be abroad in such a storm.

I remembered that among the articles of clothing I had left in the hut was a coat. The chill in the air made this chance seem good fortune again. I went to the straw cot and found the garment without difficulty. It was quite dry and I slipped into it. Then I made up my mind to kick together such stuff as there was in the hut and start a small blaze, for the chill was creeping in rather uncomfortably.

I spoke to Hal again to reassure him if he were awake. But he gave no answer and I became contentedly sure that he was asleep again. So I booted a spot bare at the end of the hut sufficiently far

from the wall and gathered enough chips with loose bark from the inside of the undressed logs to make a small fire. In a few minutes I had a tiny flame started. Then I closed the door, chose an upper corner where a chink in the clay already showed, and dug out a chunk or two of the filling between the logs to make a ventilator. I had the satisfaction, too, of seeing the rising smoke mostly sweep over to and out of my improvised chimney. Then I turned again to Hal.

He had seemed very pale when he had lain staring up at me at the time of his waking, but now, as I looked at him, it seemed that his color had come back. Indeed, in the firelight his cheeks appeared to be flushed, and, full of anxiety as I was, I feared this indication also. There was little else that I could do, however, now that a fire was built. I picked the light little body and its coverings up again, however, and laid it on the straw cot with the blanket underneath for better protection. I thought the boy's forehead felt hot to the touch, but I could not be sure, for my hands were cold. I hung over the sleeping lad as if he were a baby, I confess.

Time went slowly then, while I stood about hoping that the rain would pass. There seemed to be no cessation in the storm, however. There was less incessant lightning and thunder, but the heavens were indeed loosed of their waters, for the downpour was the heaviest I have ever known. Our shack was amazingly tight and its situation on the

crown of a knoll was the only thing that kept us from being drowned out. As it was, the water ran down the logs on the side toward the wind, for there were cracks enough in the side-walls to admit it. There were two places where considerable drip came through the roof, too; one near the door and the other in the corner at the same end, but opposite. At the cot end, where I had made my fire and laid my slumbering friend, we were reasonably dry, though I felt the chill of the sucking drafts.

I stamped about some for warmth, for I was not heavily clad. My earlier exertions, too, had started a perspiration that had dampened my inner clothing, and the rain had wet me outside. In truth I was rather wretchedly uncomfortable and I boomed our small fire up as high as I could with the poor fuel available.

Meantime, my mind went over the features of our predicament. A whole countryside was doubtless by now on the lookout for us; and here we were hiding out in an actual haunt of our arch-enemy, almost in reach of his hand, with only the storm as a reasonably sure present guarantee of temporary safety. Such a situation was scarcely of the sort to be chosen or anticipated as a result of accident, but for that very reason it had its advantages. No one would look for us here, and only the chance of Bain or some of the men coming up here soon after the rain, would jeopardize us. The fact that my clothing had remained undisturbed on the straw just

as I had left it was some evidence that no one had been here since the violent scene in which I had participated.

That thought caused me suddenly to remember my little weapon that had stood me in such good stead on that occasion, and I looked for it at once. I found it—still unbroken—a simple little tube of paper lying half lost down beside the logs near the door. And I discovered the empty pepper-shaker, too, among the straw?

My watch informed me that it was after noon now. It seemed an age, indeed, since this day's work had begun. But the rain was flooding the world outside and there was nothing to do but wait. I wished that an extra blanket were available, for it was growing cold and raw and my poor little fire was not of much avail against the wet and driving wind. It was mainly useful as a light giver, though I could not say much for the cheer it furnished as the material to feed it began to run short. I pried off all the bark that clung to the old logs, but much of it would not burn well on so small a blaze and the chips about were not many. I burned handfuls of straw for a time, but they made only fitful flares and much smoke. I was of the opinion that the straw was more useful as a part of the bed.

I looked at Hal frequently, but his eyes were always closed and his respiration soft. He made no sound in his sleep. The storm did not seem to disturb him a second time. He was perfectly still so

far as I noticed. If he moved at all it was while I was not closely attending, and I wondered at the lasting power of the sedative. I ceased to worry about him as the flush appeared to have subsided in his face, and I decided that the effect had been due to the ruddy firelight. I touched his delicate temples with my fingers and thought of the strange contrast between his fragility and my crude strength. And then I remembered that it was less than a week since the thread of my life had crossed his, with which it was now curiously—irretrievably—knotted. And in the train of this followed the long review of all that had come to pass with the puzzling mysteries upon it and the crisis in which we were involved standing here like a mighty snarl to which I could not see the unraveling.

But the cold grew as the storm boomed on, and there came a time when I felt that it was needless for me to stand about and freeze while two of us might wrap up together in our covers to the advantage of both. For two in a blanket are better than one, when its thickness and not its size is meager. I looked at Hal and concluded I should do him no injustice if I took him in my arms, overcoats and all, and burrowed for both of us into the outer blankets. So it was quickly, if not dexterously, done; and was none the less comforting, if awkward. After two minutes' fumbling I had his head lying—still protected by its red and white skating-cap—snug on my shoulder, and I drew the covers in

around us both hugely to the improvement of my own situation and not a little, I believed, to Hal's. And then I settled back against the logs to wait it out, while the storm raged impotently at us and my fire dwindled to unsubstantial coals and faded into the general gloom.

The dull light, the grateful warmth, the steady pounding of the rain—of them nature made a powerful soporific for me. I went to sleep. Quite unintentionally—of course—I went to sleep, and slept long and soundly. And I woke to quiet and peace and darkness and the drip of an ended storm, but with the light pressure of the slender warm body of my friend upon me and the sense of safety still with us to quiet the first instinctive start. There was the smell of old smoke in the air, with occasional breaths of fresh currents about us. The cold was considerable and I pulled the big blankets closer in about us at once. Then I listened for a time to the sounds that were audible. Somewhere, not far away, some freshet from the hills was making a splashing that intruded itself as the first noise that was clearly distinguishable. Aside from that there was little besides the nearby drip of trees and bushes. My fire had evidently gone completely out a long time before.

I put my hand up to the face of my companion. It was cool. But my touch did not disturb the sleeper apparently and I wondered again. How late it might be I did not know, but it was all of ten

hours now since the sleeping-mixture had been given. Its effects must wear off soon. If not, was it safe to allow the sleep to continue? I felt that perhaps it was reprehensible in me to have allowed myself to fall asleep when harm might have come of the long delay. But the soft breathing was against my neck and I found the pulse still calm. I could not bear to disturb such slumber, for what had I to offer in exchange for the peace it held? A cold dark night in a lonely place where danger was only suspended—possibly now a nearer threat than I believed—and a long wait for day or a blind search in the wet woods for a way by which to continue our wild flight. I waited.

But presently the sense that this silent sleep could hardly longer be wholesome for my charge moved me to rouse him. It would be better to stir the unconscious brain now to a waking knowledge of our whereabouts, for I felt certain as I remembered their gaze that the eyes into which I had looked by the light of the lightning and my burning match had had no understanding in them.

I moved and sat up, holding the covers close about us.

“Hal!” I whispered.

There was no reply.

“Hal!” I repeated aloud.

The small frame stirred and I felt the fingers of the hand I held grip mine.

“Hal, are you awake? This is Randall. We’re

safe together in the hills. Don't be frightened. We are——"

But I did not finish. I felt a quick stir and start and the relaxed form in my arms grew abruptly tense. Then, suddenly a gasping breath and a whisper while the fingers held mine tightly again.

"Where am I?"

"Safe, old man," I answered.

"Where?"

"In the foothills back of Cold Spring Farm."

"And you?" The whisper had grown strained. Suddenly it became softer. "And you—are Dan Randall?"

Something stirred in me strangely—something that was like a welling of unexplained emotion. The whispers in the black darkness of the room took on a sound that startled me like the waking from dreams to real. I did not know what was the influence upon me, but my heart began to beat with a wild leaping that sought my very breath. I bent forward and released myself from the blanket. Then I struggled up and got upon my feet, fumbling for my matches. In an instant I found one and struck it upon the rough bound edge of a rubber blanket, dry now to the touch. Next moment I held up the flaming thing and bent down to look into the face beneath my own.

The dark eyes were wide and wondering, startled but not terrified. The delicate lips were parted and tremulous though not with fear. But the cap had

been pushed back, the fair forehead showed white and smooth, and tendrils of soft, dark hair clustered about it. And revelation came to me as I looked, like the flooding of my match-light upon the darkness, and my blood took fire as inflammable stuff and burned to my very heart. For the countenance I looked upon was not that of the boy—the sick unfortunate fellow-fugitive I had dreamed I was guarding and saving. It was, in all the glorious charm of rising blush, in the wonderful sweetness of girlish modesty surprised, in the loveliness of its own pure exquisite beauty, the face of Donna Philbric.

CHAPTER XXII

THE REACH OF THE LAW

THE flickering match revealed us to each other. She did not move; she seemed not to breathe; while I—what can I say that will convey a little of the feelings that held me spellbound? And the flame in my fingers burned slowly up to its full flare; then, as I turned it, waned gradually, sank and went out.

“Donna!” I whispered, as the darkness again enclosed us.

She did not answer.

“Donna,” I said again. “I didn’t dream of it.”

Still she did not speak. I could not bear it. My mind was a whirling tumult now. I dared not trust myself to try again to say the reassuring thing. Then I caught a handful of the straw, dropped it where our fire had been and touched another flame to it. The last of my gathered fuel lay untouched and I piled it carefully about the blaze, while I felt my heart beat in my very finger-ends. What had I done?

I turned to look at her again, at last, and found her gaze upon me with searching question in it. As

my eyes looked into hers, however, her head drooped slowly till her hands came suddenly up to cover her face.

"How could I have done it?" I asked, coming and dropping upon one knee beside her. "Donna, you took Hal's place?"

She nodded.

"He went away, dressed in clothes of yours?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Where?"

"Bob took him to a sanitarium in the North."

"He's safe, then?"

"Yes."

"And you?"

"I was afraid Aunt Charlotte and the servants would know. I didn't dare trust any one—and you were gone."

"I went only for a brief errand."

"I know."

"I meant to take Hal safely into the hills. When the officers came——"

I paused. The rush of memories in the light of this thing was confusing. She took her hands from her face but did not look up.

"You came back for Hal."

"Yes. I found you asleep. Aunt Charlotte told me she had given you—Hal—the sleeping-mixture. You have slept ten hours."

She was silent again.

"How can you forgive me?" I asked, for the

thought of enormous offense only was insistent in my mind.

"Forgive you?"

"I meant to help Hal, you see."

"You've proved that."

"I did not mean to involve you so."

"Involve me? I involved myself. But I did not know Aunt Charlotte's medicine was the sleeping potion. Ten hours, you say?"

"Yes. It seems remarkable."

"I have slept poorly—little, indeed, for a night or two."

"And now?"

"I am not harmed by it." She looked up at me now. "Where are we?" she asked.

"I reckon about seventy miles from home. We are in a small hut which I—which I saw when I was here on Conrad's farm. It is just at the foot of the big hills behind Cold Spring. There's a stream between us and the farm proper and we're in a thicket of woods. I brought you in the blue car. It's outside." I stopped. I had told her some of these things before. "Didn't you hear me tell you when you first waked in the storm?"

"The storm?" She looked at me as if mystified.

"Yes. We have had a severe storm. It commenced about noon or earlier and has only now stopped, I think. I've been asleep myself."

I could not look into her eyes then. The thought of that sleep made the heat mount into my brain.

I got upon my feet again and stood by the fire before her.

"I dreamed," she said slowly. "I dreamed of the storm. I saw lightning and rain, and then I saw you. You burned matches and told me not to be afraid."

"I supposed you were Hal," said I helplessly.

"I know," she said. "I meant to deceive—everybody."

She smiled faintly now, but the blush came again to her face. She looked at the blankets and the rubber coverings. The course of her thoughts now seemed plain. A wild rush of words came to my lips and in choking them back I became dumb. She looked up once more.

"Dan Randall," she said, "you have laid yourself liable to the law, have you not?"

"We are both fugitives—or were."

"You are a good friend."

I smiled. What a meaningless phrase was that! But I could not speak its better. I had no right, here and now.

She put aside the blankets and stood up. She was dressed in her brother's clothing, but a long overcoat covered her from shoulders to heel. As she stood erect, the light struck up upon her sweet face and shone in her hair, and my brain was fairly faint with the very sense of the nearness and intimacy of our relation. She turned to me and smiled.

"Shall we go home now?" she asked.

The thought had not come to me. Half stupefied by the fact of her presence here I had contemplated only that. I took the word from her almost as a rebuke upon my utterly selfish and inconsiderate stupidity.

"Yes," I said, "we should, I suppose, as soon as may be."

I looked at my watch now. It was six o'clock and ten minutes.

"The car is outside. I covered it with the tarpaulin."

I started toward the door.

"Did you tell me that before, also?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I remember. It wasn't a dream then. And you carried me—in your arms?"

"Yes," I answered softly. "I carried you."

I opened the door and looked out. The woods were dark and wet. The sound of the rushing freshet was plainer now. The water must be high. A sudden recollection of the bridge we had crossed before we reached the woods came to me with quick apprehension as to its condition. I stepped out and looked around. All was dark and still in the immediate region.

I went out through the path. I could just distinguish the opening through the trees as a darker space than the rest. The girl followed. I put my hand back to her and she took it. By common consent we were silent, though she could have no knowl-

edge that we might run risks by talking. We rounded the thicket and made our way through the trees in as nearly the direction of the car as I could remember; and we found it presently, standing big and dark and still.

The tarpaulin was loaded with water where it sank in great hollows between the seats, but it had clung in place, and, as I dragged it off, splashing its contents on the sodden leaves, I found the leathern cushions dry.

"We played in luck here," I whispered to Donna, coming close to her where she stood waiting. "The car is dry."

"Yes," she answered briefly.

"Get in," I said. "I'll bring the things and then I'll pilot the way out."

I went back to the cabin, groping my way. So agitated was I now that my hands trembled—and I am not much given to that sign of weakness. I felt months and years older than yesterday, for the emotion of the hours seemed to have added an immeasurable span to my life. I stopped in the door of the hut and leaned against the upright post, with my brain dizzied and my heart throbbing with heavy labor. Why had this come? Why had this come to me? Why should it be that I should have and hold and feel the wild thrill of possession of the sweetness that could not be mine? Oh God! She was not mine! I knew; she belonged to another man, and I—I who loved her better than my life—

I must guard her—from the very knowledge of that love.

I almost staggered under the trivial burden of the blankets as I went back to the car. I knew I was not quite myself now—not quite possessed of full command over my faculties. The great passion had burned me till I felt almost as if I had received a sickening hurt. But I kept my rebel tongue in leash.

I found the girl in the car. She had taken the seat at the wheel.

“I know the country,” she said simply, as I came up and tossed my load into the tonneau. I did not answer, but went to the crank and started the engine. It took the spark with a soft whir of easy action. Then I went forward a little way, barely able to make out my path among the trees. How we were to get out I did not see.

I bethought me then, however, of a probable bundle of oil-soaked waste in the tool box and I found it for the looking. Presently I improvised a torch by tying the stuff to a wet stick. Lighting it, I sent a glare far and near among the trees, and by its flame, Donna turned the big machine and guided it back to the cart-track. There I lighted the lamps and stamped out my flaming torch in the mud of the ditch. And in five minutes we were off down the slope toward the bridge.

I had taken the seat beside the girl. I anticipated possible danger and trouble at the bridge, but I did

not speak of it, for she ran the car slowly at the start. The instant the great lights of our machine swept down upon the gully, however, I knew that difficulty lay ahead. The whole great cut in the hill-side, where had been a considerable but not dangerous stream that morning, was now full to the brim with a foaming brown flood that was tumbling a foot deep over the floor of the bridge, a part of the rail of which had been torn away.

Donna stopped the car.

"That's bad," she said, "but not unexpected."

"Did you anticipate it, too?" I asked.

"Oh yes," she said. "I've seen it worse. I wouldn't dare to run the car out upon that bridge now."

"No," said I. "Is there any other way out?"

"There's the river bank itself," she answered.

She nodded to the right. On the high bank there was a level stretch along which it was possible a car might run, but which was marked by no track. I glanced it over but could not follow it far in the gloom, though it was lighter here than in the woods. As I looked, however, the girl suddenly caught my arm.

"Some one is looking at us," she whispered.

"Where?"

"Over across. See, by the sumac bushes!"

I looked closely. I could make out the figure of a man. He was standing quite still, but when once seen he was easily distinguished. The glare of our

lamps painted his face white against the underbrush.

"Hello!" I called.

"Hello!" he answered readily and came forward to the bridge. He carried something in his hand and I started as I saw what I instantly thought might be a gun.

"How's the bridge?" I asked.

"See for yourself," he replied.

"Unsafe?"

"I should think so, for a car like yours."

"Where can we cross?"

"You can't cross."

"No bridge near?"

"There's a bridge a mile downstream," whispered Donna. "I can drive that far by the river-side."

"I guess you'll stay where you are," called the man.

"Not if we can help it, we won't," I answered. His voice had an unpleasant tone in it.

"Well, you can't cross here and I ain't going to let you go anywhere else," he announced abruptly.

"You're not!" I cried. "Why not, pray?"

"Because that's young Philbric you've got there in that red-and-white cap. And you're wanted, you are."

I was not utterly surprised. I had felt the threat in the attitude of the fellow. Moreover, the thing acted like a tonic to me. The thought of a chance

to stand up and fight was like a joy to me in my mood. I replied to him promptly.

"You're mistaken," I said.

"I am not," he said, "and what's more, if you try any bluff with me you'll get deeper into trouble than you are. I can shoot."

I felt Donna's hand against mine. "Shall we chance it?" she whispered. "I—I can't afford to be caught masquerading."

"Wait," I said.

CHAPTER XXIII

OBSTACLE RACE FOR TWO

I CLIMBED down out of the car and went to the head of the bridge. "Who are you?" I asked.

"I'm a deputy sheriff—that's who I am," he growled back at me.

"Well, you're after the wrong people," I told him.

"I know who I'm after," he said.

"Will you come across here and see who we are?" I asked.

He hesitated. Then, "You want me to wade through that water?"

"Not if you can walk the rail," said I.

"Well, I won't walk no rail."

"I'll come over and carry you across if you'll hold up that shooting-iron," I said.

He laughed. "Fine job you'd have," he remarked.

"I can easily do it," I answered, "and I'd rather have wet legs than to stay here all night."

He did not answer, and he seemed to waver in some uncertainty.

"Now," said I, "you're mistaken about young Philbric. You're not the only man that's asked

us about him, either. But you can see that I'm not Philbric and the person in the car is a lady."

"Don't lie to me," he said.

"I'm not lying," said I. I turned to Donna. "He thinks we are trying to bluff him, Miss Charlotte," I called, using the first name that came to me. "He thinks we are runaway crooks or something. Won't you call out to him to prove that you are not Harold Philbric?"

The girl laughed shortly. "I am not Harold Philbric," she called.

The fellow was silent for a moment. Then he spoke again. "Well," he said, "you may have him in that car. That was how he was carried off."

"Was it?" I asked. "Well, he isn't in this car and he wasn't carried away in it. This car belongs to this lady."

"Well, I can't take nobody's word," he objected.

"Come across and see," I answered. "You can't expect to keep people held up like this on no better suspicion than a red cap."

"No," he admitted. Then, "Well, you come on over here and I'll walk that rail with a hand from you."

The proposal was so surprising that I nearly laughed aloud. I instantly hoped that he meant what he said, but I could hardly credit it. Still, if I was to act, I must act immediately so as not to rouse his very ready suspicion.

I stepped down the steep bank and put a foot

readily into the water. Feeling my way then, I went slowly out upon the overflowed bridge with a hand upon the solid rail and groping carefully for footing. It was a dangerous thing to do, but in the excitement of the time I did not care. I made steady progress. The water pulled at my legs and struck cold upon my flesh through my clothing, but I hardly noticed it.

As I neared the farther side I held out my free hand to him where he stood now plainly visible in the automobile's lights.

"Come on," I cried.

He did not move. He simply shook his head. "You'll have to help me all the way," he said. "I'm not a tight-rope performer."

I began to suspect a trick, but my fighting blood was up and I also began to look for openings.

"All right," I answered, and stepped up on the road before him.

He raised his gun. "Now," he said, "you're here—you stay. Don't you move or I'll plug you full of buckshot. I'd kill you just as willing as anybody I ever see." Then suddenly raising his voice, he uttered a wild halloo.

At the instant I recognized him. He was the man to whom I had spoken on the night of my escapade at Cold Spring Farm, when I had run from the yard, after the blinding of Judson Bain, and had been minded to seek information. He was the bushy-haired chap who had stood in the porch and had

told me so readily that the girl Luella Westfall had been taken to Hart, the village at the foot of "Old Drom." And he knew me, with certainty, for as he ended his halloo, which was obviously a call for help, he began to laugh in my face.

"You must think we are all fools up here at Cold Spring," he said. "But if we are, you ain't fast enough to put it over us every time. I reckon the sight of you will be good for Judson Bain's sore eyes."

It was sudden, but not wholly unlooked for. I played the part of surprise, however. Then I laughed.

"Well," I answered him, "you've got me, haven't you?"

I kicked my water-laden shoes, and looked down at them with a feigning of bravado. Then I stooped and began spitting the water from the legs of my trousers. The road was full of the light from the car. The man stood ten feet from me, and he lowered his weapon even as I bent over. I believed that the lights must be somewhat in his eyes. In an infinitesimal fraction of a second, I made up my mind to risk a fight. I managed a step or two toward him, therefore, apparently intent on my water-soaked shoes. Then suddenly I gathered myself and plunged at him with all the power I could summon from old football days.

His gun exploded with a roar, but I was untouched. Next moment I caught him by the knees

and upset him like a baby, and the second barrel of his piece went off in the air. I lifted him and turned to the river. I had a mind to throw him into the flood, but the instant realization that it would mean almost sure death to him stopped me. I strode to the bridge instead. He had tried to kill me, but I would stop short of death for him now. I dropped him, however, into the midst of the swirling water on the bridge floor and shook loose from his clutching fingers. Then I caught his heels and dragged him as I strode out and back to the farther shore, his struggling, twisted body half submerged, his head now above, now under, while he yelled, then strangled, then coughed, and strangled again, and finally choked to silence.

I lifted him then and ran with him across to the opposite bank. There I dropped him on the wet sod, face down. I listened an instant, heard him give a bubbly gasp, sure sign of life, and then I fled to the car.

"Now drive, lady," I cried. "Go where you can best, before his friends come to his call."

I jumped into the tonneau. I was too wet now to sit by her side.

"You're not hurt?" she asked.

"No," I answered.

"I'll take the river course then," she cried.

"We'll fool them."

Courage was vibrant in her tone, and, as the car started, I began to believe that this game that had

been going against us had been played to a change of luck. I reckoned too soon. At the very instant of the start, I heard the sharp crack of a rifle or a heavy revolver, and the vicious sting in my left shoulder told me I was hit.

The blow was not hard enough to drop me. It sent stab-like tinglings in all directions in my nerves, and, for a moment, seemed to have paralyzed my arm. But it was not serious. The threat contained in that much accuracy, however, was grave, indeed. I stood up and clung to the back of the front seat so that my body might shield the girl, and we lurched out upon the soft sod with a spongy sound under our wheels but with sudden speed that was comforting.

A second elapsed, then another. Then came a second spiteful crack, and I winced involuntarily as a ball went past my ear so closely that it seemed to burn. Whoever was shooting was a marksman. Was it the part of a fool I was playing to run and draw such fire? I had no assurance that it would stop if we did. The man on the bank had excuse enough to shoot, after my handling of his partner—excuse that would stand inquiry as against my word now. I felt quite certain that the next bullet would hit me, but there was no better way to shield Donna, and our one hope was in gaining the first turn around the higher bank that would put us out of range. And I was right. The next bullet did hit—it caught me in the side below the shoulder

blade and plowed along a rib, and it seemed as if I could feel it scour the bone. But it did not give me such immediate, exquisite pain as the first had inflicted, and I hung on and continued to stand. Next moment we turned at the brow of the bluff and were out of range.

I sat down among the blankets in the big rear seat. Dizziness swept over me for the moment. Then my head cleared, and I felt sure I should not lose my grip on myself. The girl was bending over the wheel, giving the car more speed than I would have dared to give it. But she kept the smooth stretch on the bank as if by sure instinct, and we fled away into the darkness with the purr of the engine mingling with the roar of the water close at hand.

But we had not gone far before she slowed the pace and turned to speak to me.

"The lower bridge is at the town of Vernon," she said.

"Can you drive so far?" I asked, not daring to lean toward her for fear of increasing the bleeding of my worse wound, which I could feel now in my clothing.

"Yes. But they will be on the watch for us there."

"Probably."

"We couldn't get across," she said. "And even if no one opposes us, the bridge itself will be as dangerous as the one above us."

"Then we'll have to turn elsewhere."

"I believe——" she began, then hesitated. "I believe," she repeated, "that I know how to beat them."

She started the car again before I could reply and ran on along the way she had chosen. We came to rising ground presently, and she changed the gear and climbed the small hill, up and away from the stream. And then, suddenly, she turned the car and it started with a jump, and in a second I heard a snapping crash, and I was conscious of flying splinters of wooden rails as we went squarely through a field fence. But I had no time to consider that, for the car took a sagging dip, and then a sudden climb, and I saw before me on the left the shine of the lights on the wet steel parallels of a railroad track.

For an instant I had the fear that the car was out of her control, but I heard her reassuring laugh, and she brought the machine around with ease, till our head-lamps cast their beam straight out along the rails.

"I did it, didn't I?" she cried.

"You surely did something," I answered, and I forgot the sting of my wounds as I watched what followed.

"Now for something better," she said quietly, and the car started again like a horse under touch of the spur. And suddenly I found myself leaning forward in the tonneau, grasping the cushions in

front of me, in sheer incredulity, as I saw before us a long unguarded railway trestle, stretching away into the dark, its ties black and dim, its rails gleaming like silver under our lights. And I held my very breath while that girl, the very embodiment of all that was feminine and gentle, deliberately drove her machine straight out along those ties where few men of my acquaintance would have dared to drive by daylight.

I do not believe ignorance of her risk played any part in her taking it. I believe she knew and understood, and I, as I saw the chance she faced, knew also what safe return to her home without discovery of her "masquerade" meant to her. But whatever her thought of the risk, take it she did, and a moment later I was gazing over the side of the car down into a chasm, fifty feet at least to the foam-whitened torrent below, while the car was bumping over the ties at a rate that jarred me nearly off the seat and made me anticipate a plunge at any instant to the river's bottom.

But Donna was wiser than I knew. The gauge of the track was almost exactly that of the motor's wheels and the girl kept our right wheels close inside the right-hand rail. Timber guard-rails ran along inside the train-rails, and she managed to slip both forward and rear wheels on the right side of the car into the opening between the steel track and its wooden parallel, adding infinitely to her chances of a safe crossing. And then she dared advance her

spark and straightened up to the work of holding a steady wheel as if her nerves were of steel.

So we crossed. She did not look down at the river below, or at the spinning, dizzying procession of ties slipping away under us. She looked steadfastly ahead and held on, because safety and escape depended upon it. My own spirit rose in boundless admiration of her, and I felt little else then, as we sped surely if roughly on. And presently we were out upon the solid earth of an embankment again and she was turning into a muddy road at a crossing close to the high bank and settling back as if to smooth running, with only an excited little laugh again to tell the story of the strain.

I did not speak, but presently she turned.

"Were you scared?" she asked, and laughed as I had not heard her laugh before, a free, joyous laugh that meant high hope and confidence now.

"Yes," said I. "But I should not be again."

"Oho!" she answered. "You grow readily used to danger."

"No," said I, "I've seen you do it now and should not feel fear another time."

She laughed once more and pushed her lever forward. The big motor hummed and we began to fly through the splashing pools and spattering mud. I leaned back and remembered my hurts, but cared little for them then. And I sat with silent lips while the pain of a deeper wound gripped my heart.

It was a long ride, but we made it in less time than it had taken us that morning under my driving. I remembered what King had said of the girl on the morning of my first ride toward The Hazels. "She drives like the wind when she wants to hurry," had been his comment. And she drove like the wind now through darkness that would have made me cautious, but with seemingly perfect familiarity with every level stretch and curve. And we came out suddenly from a dark lane upon a familiar patch of road at last, and almost as quickly as I recognized it, we turned in at the big gate of the home-grounds and swept up to the house and stopped.

Late as it was the house was alight, and servants came running at the sound of our arrival. I climbed out upon the gravel with some difficulty, for pain was growing in my hurts now and the sick feeling spread through me at renewal of activity. I reached to help the girl to alight, and managed it. Then we walked in through the long veranda, while John and his aids came out to us. And in a moment more we were in the wide hall with Aunt Charlotte, Doctor Graham, and King himself, hurrying to greet us.

"Hal?" cried Donna, first of all questions.

"He is safe," answered King promptly, and came forward.

Both he and Graham looked strangely at me, but before we spoke a cry from Aunt Charlotte arrested us all.

"Donna! Child, what has happened? You are hurt!"

I turned with fear leaping up in me. Had she, in her fine courage, hidden a wound too? She turned to the light and suddenly I saw upon the white collar and shirt front she wore, and on the collar of the coat, the scarlet stains of blood.

"Dear girl!" I cried, catching her arm, "did that devil hit you? Are you wounded?"

She looked up wonderingly. Then she smiled. "If I am," she said, "I do not know it. I have not felt it."

Her aunt seized her and drew her toward the library. The doctor followed quickly and servants clustered after them. Only King and I stood still, for he was facing me with ugly light in his eyes that I could not choose but regard.

"So," he said, when we stood alone, "you have come back."

I regarded him coldly. A brute anger stirred in me at the man who would judge without the facts. "We have come back," I answered simply.

He glared at me. "You're either one thing or the other," he began again, with evident effort to control a more dangerous impulse than to speak. "Tell me—which are you, a knave or a fool?"

CHAPTER XXIV

LOVE OUT OF LEASH

THE light in the hallway shone across his face. I remember how the muscles of the jaw stood out. I looked him in the eyes and grew calm as I saw the madness of his rage and realized his cause.

“King,” said I quietly, “I am not the knave you choose to think. Neither am I exactly the fool you might wish to believe. Take time to learn truth before you judge, and when you have, I’ll talk to you.”

I passed him. At the library door I paused and looked in. I heard Donna laugh and knew that she was not hurt. Then I went on and slowly up the stairs. My wounds were cold and stiff and paining a good deal now, and I knew I could not face them all again without showing that I was injured. I found it necessary, indeed, to take hold of the stair-rail as I climbed and to pause at the landing; but I did not look back to see whether King noted my condition. I crept on and up to my room, turned on my lights, and sank, faint and giddy, into a chair. And then suddenly everything went black, as a cloud settled over my eyes, and I lost knowledge of the world.

When I came back to consciousness, I was in my bed, swathed tight in bandages, and Graham was at my side. Bustling about the room was Mrs. Griggs, the housekeeper. At the foot stood old John, eagerly solicitous.

"Oh, you're coming to again, are you, young man?" were the doctor's first words.

"I've had a knock-out?" I asked faintly.

"Came near being worse than that," he said gravely. "You are remarkably strong."

"Yes," said I, remembering. "How bad is it?"

"The shoulder wound is not serious. The bullet in your side cut deep. I don't know yet how much trouble it's going to make."

"Not much," I answered him. "It didn't hurt enough."

He smiled grimly. "You fellows of the giant make don't know when you are hurt," he replied.

But I knew. I have always been able to distinguish the shallow from the deep injury by the feel of the wound.

"And Miss Philbric?" I asked.

"She is not hurt. It was your blood—close to your heart's blood, young fellow—that was spilled upon her."

His words went deeper than he knew.

"How could they catch you so low in the side, over the back of the car?" he asked me, and his look down upon me was queer.

"I was standing up," I said.

"While Donna ran the motor?"

"Yes," I answered. "She will tell you all about it."

"She has," he said. "But she didn't know that, I think." The expression of his face changed slowly and he regarded me with a new look of the eyes. "She didn't know you were hurt," he added presently.

"Of course," I said. "Don't tell them more than you have to. I can get up to-morrow?"

"You cannot. You will lie still till I know where that bullet is that cut the hole in your side."

I stared at him. I would not lie still, of course. I was not crippled. I laughed. "Do you think I'm going to be cut out of the game like this?" I asked resentfully.

He did not answer my question. He put another instead. "When did you last eat?"

I paused to think. I had not thought of food that day certainly. I remembered gradually. "Yesterday noon," I said, and grinned at him.

"I thought as much. Donna has not eaten since breakfast. Did you two plan to starve yourselves?"

I felt a pang of compunction. I had forgotten for two.

"But," said the doctor, "the girl has slept most of the time. You have not, and what's more you've lost some quarts of blood, I should judge by your clothing. I think even you may feel content to rest awhile and recuperate now."

He turned to the housekeeper, and she came forward, smiling.

"Do you feel better?" she asked kindly, and reached to straighten my pillow with a truly motherly touch.

"Yes," said I. "I'm all right."

I did not see how I could well question the doctor or the servants about the things I most wished to know, so I lay rather silent, only acquiescing to the proposals they made for my comfort. Truth to tell, there was indeed a feeling of languor and willingness to rest upon me. But a fever burned in my heart. I longed with unspeakable longing to see the dear girl whom I had dragged into peril and to assure myself with my own eyes that she was safe and none the worse for the wild adventure we had come through together. But I could not ask for her.

I accepted the proposal that I should eat, and I nodded adieu to the doctor as he went off downstairs with final prohibition upon any activity on my part. I received old John's kindly attentions and then ate from the tray that Mrs. Griggs brought to me. But my thoughts were not on any of these things. They went over the day's happenings in swift review with the ever keen consciousness of the sweet companionship that had been mine. And I knew that love had put its roots too deep into my heart ever to be torn out.

But Mrs. Griggs would talk. "I thought she

was her brother, too, Mr. Randall," was the remark that finally arrested my attention.

"You?" I said.

"Yes. I saw her after she had dressed in his clothes and put on the cap. I had no notion that she was not Hal. Neither had any one else—except Mr. King."

I did not comment on that.

"And when you carried her off we all thought you were taking Hal. And the officers thought so, too, and followed you."

A sudden recollection came to me. "The girl!" I exclaimed. "What about the girl, Aileen? She gave the alarm."

"Alarm?" repeated the housekeeper.

"Yes. I passed her in the hall, with Hal in—I passed her when I was on my way to the garage. Before I ran the car out I heard her scream for the officers to come."

The woman regarded me curiously. "Oh," she said. Then, "No, no! Did you think so? Don't you know what she did?"

"I heard her call for help."

"No, indeed, you didn't," exclaimed Mrs. Griggs with sudden indignation. "Listen. I saw that from the windows of the linen-room. I saw you go out and I saw Aileen come back into the room with me and stand quite still waiting in silence for what would happen as all of us did. And then one of the officers came running past the window

and turned down the path to the garage. And that girl—do you want to know what she did? She whirled back into the hall and to the outside door and screamed as if she was killed. And she called the officer back and said, 'Here he is! Here he is!' till the fellow came running up the steps. And she led him up the stairs and halfway through the hall before he suspected he was tricked. And then it was too late. You'd got away."

I raised upon my elbow despite the doctor's injunctions. "By the lord Harry!" I said. "She's one brick! She ought to have a reward!"

"She doesn't want one, Mr. Randall," said the housekeeper. "And what's more," she added hastily, "I've found out about that plan of the grounds. She didn't even know what it was. She found it in that very back staircase through which you passed."

"Oh," said I, and was silent, while a new course of thought came swiftly into my brain.

"And that makes a new clue to the queer mystery of the cigarettes."

"The cigarettes?" I asked. "What do you know about the cigarettes?"

"Why, the cigarettes Mr. King found in the attic," she answered, looking at me astonished.

"Oh," said I again. "King found cigarettes, too, did he? So did I. In the attic, did you say?"

"Yes, on the floor—four of them."

"What kind were they?" I asked, smiling.

"They're a kind that is called Peacherino," she said.

"I see. I found one this morning in the path at the side gate. Our ghost smokes. But the attic, you say? What does that mean?"

"I don't know what it means," she answered. "Nobody seems to. Mr. King spent all the evening, after he got back here, hunting about."

"I see," said I. "Is there any way from the attic into the front halls?"

"Why, no, sir, not direct."

"Isn't, eh? Well, it's a mystery still, then, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said.

As she spoke she rose. Some one was at the door, and I looked up as a knock sounded on the panel. It was Donna.

For an instant my cup of satisfaction was full, but almost immediately it was dashed. King was with her. They came forward together. The girl almost ran to the side of my bed.

"Dan Randall!" she cried. "You were hurt! You were shot out there on the road and you never told me."

I laughed, and from my soul I thanked the man who had winged me. Nor could I forbear to take the hand she rested on the pillow.

"It is just lucky," said I, "that the fellow we ducked wasn't as good with his gun as the friend who came at his call."

But she did not smile. She shuddered. "I didn't realize how near he was to killing you," she said.

"It wasn't near at all," I answered. "He had no time for any aim, but he had to shoot. He merely pulled his trigger in perfectly blind helplessness."

I looked up at her with the love for her blinding me to all else as she stood close beside me and let her hand remain in mine. She smiled—kindly—down upon me.

"They didn't catch us," she said simply.

"No," said I, "they didn't catch us."

King stood at the foot of the bed. I felt his eyes upon me then and turned to him. I was not averse to letting him feel a pang of jealousy for a moment, after his treatment of me. But the power I held for an instant was what would make later recollection bitter, when his time came again—for all time. His dark eyes stared at me moodily and I saw the skepticism in them.

"Just when were you shot?" he asked me, without even the grace of a mention of my name.

"Oh, this evening," I answered him carelessly.

His face turned red at the counter-thrust. He moved to go away, then turned again with the light in his eyes narrowing to a glitter. But Donna was looking in startled fashion from one to the other of us and he hesitated.

"What's this?" she asked sharply.

The housekeeper had left us and no servants were

within hearing. King's anger broke out beyond his control.

"Donna," he said, "if you know this man, please introduce me."

She gazed at him amazed.

"Who is he?" asked the angry fellow, and in the moment of his attack I pitied him. I saw that he had been bearing the unendurable. But it was not for me to answer him direct.

"Tell him who I am," I said to the girl, holding fast to her soft fingers that could touch with such gentleness, but that had dared to drive that motor-car across the railway trestle.

She looked down at me again and, for a moment, her face softened. Then slowly the blush mounted from cheek to brow and spread over her whole face as she answered.

"He is Dan Randall," she said; and that was all.

The thing stirred me to the soul. I laughed and started up. "Bob King," I said, "I take you for a man. If you are, speak out now and tell me what you hold against me."

But his suspicion was too deep for fair words. He sneered. "Why do you smoke cigarettes in the attic?" he asked.

I could hardly credit my ears. But of all the things that can make a fool of a man, count jealousy the first. I shouted with laughter.

"Peacherino cigarettes?" I demanded. A flash of intelligence came to illuminate his position.

"Yes," he cried. "What sort of a cheap trickster are you? What kind of a mountebank masquerader?"

"That's four," said I calmly. "King, you are making a fool of yourself and trying to be my enemy. Haven't we enemies enough without a fight among ourselves? I'll answer you though. I haven't smoked a cigarette since I was sixteen. If you found the box in my coat that I left on a chair here this morning, you found what looked like a clue——"

"They were on your dresser," he interrupted.

"Well," said I, "then John put them there when he took my coat for a pressing, or something of the sort. But, man, those cigarettes were bought at the village to-day to identify a stub I found in the path outside—like the stubs you found in the attic."

"Who told you that?" he asked.

"You might as well have told me. But as a matter of fact Mrs. Griggs gave me the first information. Now tell me why you construe every incident wilfully against me—you and Doctor Graham?"

He had opened his mouth to speak in answer and his face was white with anger, when Donna suddenly held up her hand.

"Wait, Bob," she said. "You two shall not quarrel. I will not have it. I know you both too well to believe you have the basis for it. You shall stop now till we have all the facts. Then you can explain, or I shall for you. But, Bob, look at Dan's

face. He is doing what Doctor Graham said he distinctly must not. He shall rest now. We must go."

I settled back upon the pillow. Indeed, I had felt already the start of bleeding in my wounds. But King turned away without a word and walked to the door. Donna stood still, looking after him. I felt her hand move to withdraw itself from mine, but I could not let it go. King stepped outside and still she stood beside me, silent, looking after the man who had left us. At last she turned once more quietly to me.

"Why did you stand in the car?" she asked slowly.

My heart stood still. Then I tried desperately to answer lightly.

"To see ahead," I said. But I could not even smile to carry the jesting words. My whole soul was crying out to be heard—just to tell her why I would lay my life at her dear feet.

"You were shot because you stood," she said. "Why did you stand?"

I could not speak. I would have made a laugh of it if I could, but no words came. I felt her fingers tighten on mine.

"You did it to save me," she said softly. "You saved my life."

I turned my rough unshaven cheek against her hand. I could not longer hold the leash. "God forgive me for telling you, Donna," I whispered.

"But you are safe now and I cannot help it. I love you."

I closed my eyes, with the physical faintness again upon me. My disturbed wounds were taking toll of my strength again. I felt consciousness slipping away and I pressed her fingers to my lips once, as the darkness crowded in again between me and the light.

CHAPTER XXV

A GHOST THAT SMOKED

IT seemed but the lapse of an instant before I opened my eyes once more, this time to the face of the doctor and heard him speaking.

“No,” said I, as clearly as I could. “No, I’m all right.”

The girl was standing by the foot of the bed now, where also were King and Mrs. Griggs, all evidently called by alarm from her. And distress was written on her face.

“I’m all right,” I assured her, and smiled at her. I would have given worlds to call back the last moment of my consciousness and have her there again alone. But she was beyond my reach now, and the doctor’s orders, when he had looked a moment longer at me, were sharp and peremptory. And all I had by way of good-night was a nod and smile—that meant nothing to me—nothing but simple good-night.

They turned down my light and left me, and I lay with my ear upon my pillow and heard my heart-beat echo there as it used to do when I was a little chap and went wakeful and supperless to

bed as punishment for some boyish insubordination. Heaven knows I was insubordinate now. I had let my passion out of control and it had no mind to return; and I lay with fever burning me and a mad desire upon me to be up and seeking out the girl I loved, to be with her again—to demand an answer to the love I had given and could not recall.

My window was open and the soft night breeze was blowing in again, sweet and damp and spring-like once more after the rain. I felt it cool upon my face and lay still to breathe it and to calm the tumult that seemed to fill my being. I looked out at the top of the swaying maples where the leaves were thickening to cast a shadow now, and I remembered that one more day had passed—just one more day since my cards were dealt. Was the game near its end? And was I loser—or to win?

It seems to me that it was hours before I slept. The house was still—kept so purposely, of course. I lay counting the moments over since I had first seen beautiful Donna Philbric and remembering that I had lived a life before—a forgotten thing now. I thought of the story as a dream at moments—then as the only reality I had ever known. I remembered Hal again too, poor boy, and his trouble, as something far back in the past, behind this day and its final hour. And I wondered how long now we might be immune from the trouble that was still to come, that was not ended yet. And then I slept, and woke to the silence and darkness of early morn-

ing; and then to sounds that brought me again sharply to immediate realities.

I do not know what it was I heard at first. Some creaking of flooring, some snap of a latch or click of lock, some scrape of a foot or incautious stumble. My eyes opened wide in the gloom—for my light had been turned out while I slept—and I saw in the middle of my chamber, against the white enamel of the door, a small figure, shrunk or misshapen, shadowy, stealthy—saw it moving—quietly, carefully moving toward me in fashion that held me bound in sudden tense alertness.

Who or what it might be was utterly beyond me at first; but presently I became sure of the single fact that the being was human and I began with care equal to his to prepare for what I supposed was imminent attack. My arms were under the covers. I drew my hands slowly to the edge of the blankets at my chin and flexed my elbows out. If it were to be a trial of muscular strength I had little fear for mine, though I could not yet reason out a cause for such attack. I felt the first sense of rest one often feels when waked at an early hour after deep and dreamless sleep, and I half forgot my injured condition as I waited with stirring pulses for assault. The man—if man he was—would doubtless be armed. If with a pistol, it would do me no good to start up and make a mark of myself anew before he was within my striking distance. Of any other weapon I had little fear, for he was small,

this fellow—a boy, it seemed, and undersized at that, if I should allow for the probable magnifying influence of the dark.

He was slow and cautious to the last degree. I had time to grow impatient while he stopped and stood and waited and watched and listened. He made not a sound now, that I could hear. There was no scuff or stumble that could wake a cat. I had time to calculate what I would do and plan a trick for taking him by surprise, so that grappling with him would be easy and safe in case he had a knife.

And then suddenly I began to be conscious of the stale odor of cigarettes about me once more, and the meaning of this thing broke upon me. At the same instant I also began to see that the aim of this queer creature was not at me at all, but that he was meaning only to pass me and my bed, in slow painstaking attempt to reach my closet door.

When I saw that I bolstered up my patience. Here, then, was to be the elucidation of one of our riddles—the riddle of the bringing of our “red letters.” Here was the mischief-maker who had fooled us all and done as much to hurt Hal as had any other agent or effort of his enemies. And I began to solve the doings of the rascal there, as I lay watching his enormously careful progress through my room. The cigarette in the path, the plan of the grounds on the stairs, the cigarettes in the attic, the odor in my room, the broken vase, the

disappearance of the prowler who could not have gone through the locked door. All these minor mysteries linked together hung about this little chap who now, almost in arm's length of me, was creeping past me on some new mission. It would be his last here.

I moved slightly. The small figure stood still as a block of stone. I began to breathe heavily, in feigned semblance of sleep. He crept on. I even tried a slight snore in rising spirit of jest. The effect was to lighten the fellow's caution. He reached the door of my closet. It was closed. He opened it slowly without a sound from the knob. Then stepping inside, he drew it carefully together after him and was gone.

In an instant, regardless of wounds or orders, I was out of bed. Next moment I had turned on my lights from a switch by the door and was back at the closet. Recalling painstakingly the exact location of the light inside, I then turned the knob and drew open the door and reached instantly to fill the closet with light. Next moment there was a crash. Something seemed to fall from above and strike the floor at my feet, and a wild little animal plunged against my legs in a desperate scramble to get by and out.

I reached down and caught him up clear of the floor and turned to the light. I held him tight by the collar of his coat; but he did not offer to struggle, and I was so much surprised at that, that I

set him on his feet and nearly lost my hold because of the sudden effort he made to escape the instant he felt the slight loosening of my hands.

But I did not quite let him go. I drew him over to the hall door which was open. I closed it quickly and locked it, taking out the key. Returning to the bed, within arm's length of the closet opening, I released my prisoner and sat down. He was a strange little rat of a creature, half man, half boy, and I no sooner had a fair look at him than my pity went out to him.

He stood quite still now. Evidently he knew when he was caught. He was a hunchback, bent over and twisted with his deformity. His face was small and pinched, his figure thin. His eyes, however, were bright and clear and shrewd. He looked all of twenty-five years old.

"Well," said I to him, "and who may you be?"

He did not answer me. His eyes went over me with obvious measuring glance.

"See here," said I, "be honest with me. You're caught and your game is up. Now tell me all about it and I'll let you off the easier for it."

Still he did not answer. His eyes shifted around the room, looked at me again, then turned all about once more. I reached out and took hold of his small misshapen shoulders.

"See here," said I, "who sent you here?"

No answer; but he looked at me and then seemed unable to look away again.

"Did you come to take something away from my room?" I asked, resorting to the more direct form of question.

He shook his head now.

"Why, then? To see if Mr. Philbric is still in the house?"

His eyes narrowed, but he was silent.

"Was that it?" I asked.

His look grew cunning. Then he dropped his eyes.

"I see," said I. "Well, you haven't found him, have you? He isn't here, is he?"

He shook his head. I wondered how much prowling the little fellow could have done about the place. "Did you come through that closet?" I asked.

He nodded. I rose to my feet and went to the closet door again. The light from the incandescent inside gave me enough illumination to see distinctly. I looked around the walls and then at the ceiling. In an instant I made a curious discovery. The ceiling was of boarding and in one corner a portion of it was misplaced and showed a trap-door as plainly as could be desired.

"Oh," said I, "that's the way you came in?"

He did not answer, but looked strangely at me.

"Did Judson Bain send you to spy on this house?"

Another shake of the head.

"Did any of Bain's men send you?"

No answer.

"Now, young man," I said, "you may as well tell me. Did Wheeler Scancey send you?"

His eyes had been dodging mine. As I mentioned the lawyer's name they stopped suddenly in the effort and looked straight at me again. "They made me," he said suddenly.

"Of course they did. Scancey sent you, did he? Did he come here with you?"

The head shook decidedly.

"You are the fellow who brought the message from Bain or Scancey to Mr. Hal the day that Punk Salver was shot?" said I.

He looked at me queerly, then suddenly shook his head once more, but with a violence that was suggestive of greater responsiveness.

"Not from Bain or Scancey?" I asked.

"From Punk," said he, as abruptly as he had spoken before.

"You brought the message from Punk himself?"

"Yes."

The thing startled me. Here was evidence certainly. I pulled him around and made him sit down on the edge of the bed beside me.

"If you will tell me the exact truth about all this," said I, "I will let you go free and, what is more, I will be your friend."

"Punk sent me," repeated the fellow.

"Yes," said I. "Did Punk pay you anything?"

"Sure," he answered briefly.

Then Judson Bain's story of having sent Punk

Salver to Hal was one lie that I had disproved if this story was true, and it seemed to have the sound of truth. I began to grow excited.

"Is somebody waiting outside for you now?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Who?"

"Dad Langhorn," he said.

"Just why did you come here to-night?"

"To see if Hal was here."

"Don't you know that he went away?" I hazarded.

"No, he didn't."

I wondered if this positiveness had foundation in the fact that we had effectually deceived our enemy.

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Mr. King brought him back again."

"What?" I exclaimed involuntarily.

"He brought him back. Hal is in the house again."

It was surely my turn to feel surprise. The fellow spoke with assurance that was enough to shake the firmness of any impression I had had before. Could this thing be true? Had King played a game that he had not revealed to me—or to Donna? She had told me that the boy had been taken to a sanitarium in the North. Did she know that to be a fact? Perhaps King had failed in his mission for some reason and had brought the sick boy back to the house secretly, with the plan of

hiding him here better than anywhere else; now that the impression was abroad that he had fled. But this fellow knew it, if such were the case, and he was avowedly the emissary of Scancey.

"Where is Hal?" I asked suddenly.

He grinned up in my face. He was gaining more and more confidence from my treatment of him.

"Here," he replied. "We saw him come back."

I believed him.

"Do you smoke cigarettes?"

"Yes," he said wonderingly.

I took hold of his hand and looked at his fingers. The telltale stains showed on them plainly. "What kind?" I asked.

"Peacherino."

"Who is Dad Langhorn?" I asked, without comment.

"Dad Langhorn."

"Does he live in Hazelhurst?"

He nodded.

"What is your name?"

"Garth."

"Where do you live?"

"At the livery."

I wondered if I might not be able to dress. I felt weak, but I determined to try. The hunchback made no move whatever. He sat looking about him. He was certainly a strange little creature. If half of what he had told me was true our case might suddenly take a new turn to-day. But which

way it would turn was a question to which I could not foretell the answer. Developments were coming faster than I could anticipate, however. I was only weakly beginning a toilet when there was a knock at my door. I went to open it, and there in the dim light of the hall stood Hal himself, quite unmistakably, pale and haggard in the first gray of the coming morning.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE WAY OF A SPY

I THINK neither of us spoke for half a minute after the appearance of the boy at my door. Hal stood still and looked first at me and then at the hunchback on the bed, with almost as complete surprise as I felt in looking upon him. At last he spoke.

"I heard you talking and came to see you," he announced. "I heard about your hurts and was too anxious about you to wait."

"And haven't you been away?" I asked, astonished.

"Oh, yes, of course. But didn't King tell you?"

"King tells me nothing, Hal. He doesn't like me."

The boy smiled languidly. Then he looked again at the hunchback. "What are you doing here, Garth?" he asked, to my surprise, showing ready recognition of the fellow.

"He came to look for you," answered I. "Evidently Scancey knows that you did not get away."

"Did Scancey send you?" asked Hal of the spy.

The fellow seemed more free to speak to Philbric

than to me. "Yes, he sent me," he said. "He knows you came back."

"I was afraid so," said Hal. "I stayed in King's room, Randall."

"This is the young man who has been favoring you with the 'red letters,'" said I.

Hal looked at him. "Oh, it was you, was it, Garth? What did you do it for?"

The hunchback looked at him oddly, then suddenly replied: "Money, of course."

"We have several clues here, Hal," I said. "The chap admits that Punk sent him to you."

"Of course," said Philbric. "Where have you been since, Garth?" he asked coolly.

"Up to Scancey's," answered the other.

"Haven't I been kind to you, young man? Why have you been working against me?"

The hunchback looked at him again with a queer expression, but no answer. Then Philbric asked the natural question: "How did you get in?"

"Through the garret and a trap-door in the ceiling of my closet," said I.

Philbric stared at me, his memory evidently searching his knowledge of the old house for some understanding of this. "Well, by all that's strange!" he exclaimed suddenly. "I never knew that there was such a place."

The hunchback grinned. "Dad Langhorn put me wise," he announced easily.

"Well, shades of the chiefs!" exclaimed Hal,

giving voice to surprise again. "Randall, Dad Langhorn used to work for my father years ago. He was a carpenter, but he got to drinking and drifted down till he was no good. He has been a bum about town for years. You say Dad Langhorn told you about that trap-door?" he asked again of the boy. "Did he send you here?"

"He come with me."

"Is he about the place now, then?"

"Yes."

Philbric stepped to the bell in my room and touched it. In a moment there was a sound of quick feet in the hall and a rap at my door. Hal opened it and old John stood outside.

"Get out the men quietly, John," he said, "and look for a man in the grounds. Old Dad Langhorn is snooping about somewhere."

Old John stared at the hunchback. "Where'd he come from?" he asked of Hal.

"He's our ghost, it seems, John," answered Hal.

I had found I could not dress. I lay back upon the bed and suggested that Hal take the hunchback, therefore, and go to the garret to look at the trap. They went. In ten minutes they were back with a story of as curious a contrivance as I have ever heard of. A small closet there was, off the garret, to which the hunchback led. There, to Hal's amazement, he pointed out that a portion of its floor—made solidly of boards and so well matched with the rest that the division would never

be noticed when it was in place—was arranged as a door to open down into the closet below. Hal was firmly of the opinion that if the spy had not left it out of place at the time when he tried to escape from me, it would never have been discovered. The trap fitted perfectly in place when it was pushed around to its proper position. Garth told us readily, in answer to questions, that he had been told by Langhorn just how to climb to the roof of the west wing, and in at a garret window, and to find the place; and then how to raise the trap by lifting a piece of molding at the bottom of the wainscot in the darkest portion of the closet, which concealed a hand-hold for his fingers. The place had once been the only means of access to that portion of the garret over the west wing. Through the top the spy had descended into the closet below, by means of hooks and the chest of drawers immediately beneath the opening. His errands had been simply the delivery of the messages in Hal's room without discovery, and it appeared that his knowledge of the house was due to the very kindness of Hal himself, who had tried to befriend the queer chap and had actually tried to employ him at one time a year or two before. The fellow had left him, however, and afterwards had given no excuse for it, and Philbric had concluded that it was because he preferred the low life of the men at the stables. He had still been kind to the cripple, however, and the latter had been at The Hazels on odd jobs

often, even up to within a few days before the shooting.

When I had listened to the whole of his tale I wondered no longer. He showed extraordinary shrewdness in the ways in which he had dodged unsuspecting servants and members of the household. And he told of the first experiments being made before my room was occupied, so that he had gained skill in the manipulation of his trap-door and in getting down and up before he had greater risks to take. But I confess that I felt there could be only a strange obliquity in the mind of the fellow that corresponded to the deformation of his body to account for his doings. And so it proved afterwards.

Our men came in to report soon after Hal's return. They reported failure, too, unfortunately. They had not found Dad Langhorn. He was gone. Perhaps he had taken alarm at the long absence of the boy and had fled, and after events made that seem probable indeed. But the effect of our activities had been to stir the house to wakefulness and it was but a few moments after we had completed our investigation of the garret that Donna herself, and almost immediately afterwards King, came to join us.

Donna made considerable fuss about my condition, and I had to acknowledge to myself that I had been playing to the limit of my strength. And despite my interest in what was going on, I was

forced to remain in my bed. They all gathered in my room, however. And then I heard all that had happened to King and Hal during the previous day.

They had driven away with the hope of making a quick run to the sanitarium which stood near the mountains on the north, and they had actually reached the place, only to find, when they made their request for a refuge, that the sanitarium people would not take Hal in. It was not entirely incomprehensible, of course, for the superintendent of the place foresaw undesirable publicity attached to the case, if not worse, if he should harbor the young man who was making a sensational run from the law in his strange disguise. At any rate there was nothing the superintendent would do for them for love or money.

The thing had so much discouraged Hal, who had already made serious objections to the whole scheme, that King turned about with the plan of consulting Donna by telephone. When they got to a place where they could telephone the house, they received such a strange message that they at once became alarmed for the safety of the girl herself. One of the servants had told them that Donna also had run away from the officers. It developed afterwards that a confused story of what had actually happened had gotten about the house, and that some of the maids were so thoroughly frightened and puzzled that they could hardly give an intelligible

answer to the questions asked of them. King, anxious, and Hal, half wild with terror, therefore, took the shortest path back; and when they arrived late in the afternoon, and found that Donna had actually gone away and with me, they were thoroughly at sea. King started all sorts of activities to discover our whereabouts, but nothing had come of any of them, when we ourselves appeared and told our story. But King had deliberately kept the truth regarding Hal from me, as I needed no footnotes to inform me at the end of the tale, though I did not comment on the fact then.

The household was up early and the housekeeper got an early breakfast for us while we debated what next to do. Hal was not at all amenable to the wishes of the rest of us that he should try again to escape. The news that the hunchback had brought to us that Bain and Scancey knew of the return of Philbric made me more eager than ever that Hal should run for it again while he had a chance; for I could foresee that there would be another effort to arrest him at once, or at least as soon as Dad Langhorn should carry back to town his story of Garth's probable detection and detention. But I did not anticipate how fast Langhorn's news would travel to his principals, or how nearly they were prepared to act.

I think Donna was the least disturbed of any of us at first. She seemed, too, to be quite unconscious of any reason for feeling shy of me, despite my

declaration of the night before. What to augur from this was quite beyond me. It looked painfully like indifference, though I could hardly believe she could be merely indifferent to such a thing. I dared not build hopes. It seemed too obviously hopeless a case for me. But I could not help watching the girl for a sign of her attitude toward me, which amounted to almost the same as hope-building. And I did feel the better that her fears seemed for the time a little less than I had thought they might be. I had no chance to talk alone with her, however. Whether she avoided such an opportunity purposely, I cannot say. It seems to me not entirely unlikely.

Hal, however, seemed to cling more closely to me than ever. He was determined that he would not try to run away again, but otherwise he was very tractable and he seemed to prefer to be with me rather than with King or any of the others. He did not tell me why, though I guessed it in part. He seemed to look upon King with some curious fear now, and I believed that it might have to do with the sanitarium suggestion. If that idea were in his head I could hardly blame him for preferring the man who wanted him to run to the woods, if he were to run at all. The place certainly held the pleasanter suggestion.

But he did not run. We had no chance. Our enemies were alert now, and they acted too soon for us to come to any conclusion at all after dis-

agreement in our first discussion. We had only just finished the early breakfast—a queer little divided household of us—when the alarm came that brought the crisis of all our trouble suddenly upon us.

CHAPTER XXVII

VENUS GIVES UP A SECRET

I WAS so determined that I would have a part in the day's proceedings, despite my injuries, that I persuaded John to help me into some clothing and downstairs again. But I had only just arrived in the library amid a flurry of surprise and remonstrance, and settled myself on the couch there, when John, who had gone promptly out, came suddenly back again, with fear and trembling, to announce that the officers were at hand. He was half apologetic, poor old fellow, and more than half terrorized—if such division of emotions may be allowed—as he stood before us, giving us the warning that came too late for us to take any other action than to brace ourselves to meet what should come. I have many times remembered his old face, wrinkled with the anxiety of the moment, as he said: "They've come, Mr. Hal—Mr. King, sir. The officers have come."

They had come indeed. They were in the porch before they were discovered, as we had no sentries out that morning, and they crowded in upon us almost as soon as John had the words out of his

mouth. But it was not the arrival of officers alone that caused my wrath suddenly to rise to boiling heat as I saw the men in the big hall, gathering about our library door. It was the fact that, with them, as active participant in this early morning raid upon us, was Judson Bain himself, vindictive, determined, fierce with passion that meant not to be balked now, and that had provided abundantly to see his enterprise through to the end.

The town marshal, Clausen, was ostensibly the leader of the gang—there were six of them. But he was not the backbone of the party. Bain was that. But with Bain I was not a little dismayed to see the curly-headed one with whom I had had the adventure of the day before, and whom I had left lying half-drowned on the bank of the river back of Cold Spring. Here, then, were two men who had plenty of hatred for me personally, as the result of my escapades and who were bent upon revenge, not only against me but against Hal as well; and the thought made me feel suddenly that I had played a poor game indeed, that had balked them not a whit and had only made them the more eager for retaliation against us all.

“We want two men here,” was the announcement that the marshal made as they crowded into the room on the heels of old John, as it were. And I, with the sense of my own heavy responsibility, struggled up with the whole strength of my being in rebellion against the thing. I did not try to

stand at first, but sat up on my couch and sent in my challenge with heart enough to make them pause.

"What authority have you for coming into this house in this fashion?" I demanded. I knew the relief that parleying will sometimes bring to what may at first appear like a disastrous situation.

"You know me, sir," answered the marshal with sufficiently decent respect.

"I know you claim to be the marshal of Hazelhurst," said I. "And I am ready to grant that you are. But who are these?"

I indicated Bain and the rest with a sweep of the hand that was intended to nettle the big red-faced—and red-eyed—man. And the stroke told.

"I think I have you where I want you now," he cried out at me.

I grinned at him. "Oh," said I, "you are my friend of the little hut back of Cold Spring, aren't you?"

He cursed, without regard for the presence of Donna and Aunt Charlotte. "Yes," he cried. "But you won't get away this time."

"It's a little incautious of you to admit that incident, isn't it," I asked, "in presence of all these witnesses?"

He was taken aback, as I intended he should be. He feared he had made a more compromising admission than it amounted to, and it made him furious to be so tricked.

"Never mind!" he cried. "I know what I'm about now."

"I suppose you've come to answer to me for the assault upon me in your office on the first day I arrived in this town," said I. "Is that it? Or have you made up your mind to take me while you are here to take Philbric, so that you can break us together?"

"Yes, both of you," he cried, unguardedly again.

"Another amiable admission," said I. "Witness to this, my friends. We have a pretty case against the man already, I think."

But while I spoke a sudden idea came to me for a play that should bring things to a head with suddenness that might materially change our fortunes. I got slowly upon my feet and turned to Bain.

"You know," said I, "that if Clarence Salver were alive and here you would be in prison or in flight at this moment."

He paled a bit, and I suddenly made up my mind. I took a step toward him and shook my fist almost in his face.

"Judson Bain," I cried, raising my voice higher, "you are a liar, a conspirator, a coward, a would-be murderer. You stand here perjured and convicted. You are guilty of more crimes than I can mention in a breath and you are going to suffer a richly deserved punishment for them all. You have schemed wisely and well, with the aid of that fox Scancey, haven't you? But do you know what you are fac-

ing now? I'll tell you, just for the pleasure of seeing you cringe and break here before the boy you have tried to ruin. The girl you have been trying to hide has been traced. The hunchback, Garth, your agent used for a tool in spying on this house has confessed. And what is more, you fondly overconfident rogue, your crime has found you out, for the letters—the letters that Punk Salver stole from your office and that you know he stole—the letters that have evidence in them to support Hal Philbric's story from start to finish—the letters have turned up, after all. They are here, safe and accounted for, here in this room!"

I could have roared with laughter at the face of him. Bluff, pure bluff it was on my part, but it succeeded far beyond any dream I could have cherished for it if I had had time to dream of such things. It was done on the spur of the moment and with only the moment to prepare the manner of it, but it went home like the thrust of steel in his black old heart. He fairly quailed before me. He took a backward step. He turned white as the collar about his fat neck and his very face seemed to shrink. He never dreamed that it was not the truth that I was speaking so bravely. He never suspected that it was one more game for him—another trap for his clumsy feet. And he slipped into it like the coward that he was.

He gasped. "Where are they?" he asked, with a trembling hand extended in helpless gesture.

"Here," I cried. "Right here," and I slapped my own pocket as if with all the confidence in the world.

He stared at me, his whole face expressive of his conviction that he was caught. And then, all at once, I saw the thing in his eyes that I might have expected. I saw him turning to bay. And before I could stir he made the move I should have anticipated. Suddenly crouching and grasping the heavy stick he carried in his hand, he made a mad leap at me and struck with all his might at my head.

I dodged and the blow fell short. My move, however, brought me against the fireplace and almost directly in front of Donna. I felt a stab of agony in my wound and I instantly saw that the next blow he aimed at me—which would of course be immediate, must fall on me, for I could not dodge again. The men at the door were too much surprised to act and so were my friends. Indeed, King was at the farther end of the room and Hal was beyond the table. Both of them started forward—King with a leap that I have remembered as an offset against his former attitude toward me. But neither could be in time. I had nothing with which to ward off his blow and I was in no condition to make a plunge at him that could be effective. I saw his second blow coming and was helpless.

But at the instant the man Clausen sprang for-

ward and struck the big man's arm. It was not an effective stroke but it saved my head. It diverted Bain's cruel blow, and the cane came down, not upon me, but with a jangling crash upon the bric-a-brac on the mantel. Next instant Clausen had hurled himself upon my enemy and they went down to the floor together, while the nervy little constable crushed his hands over the other's face and crowded his big head back till he was helpless.

The other men came to his aid then, and the marshal himself was promptly up and took charge of the fellow. He shoved a big gun in Bain's face with prompt promise to use it if the man started further violence.

I sat faintly in a chair with the certainty that I had opened my wounds again and wondering how I was to make good the bluff that had brought on this action. But before I had time to think of another act of my own, I heard a cry from Donna that made me forget everything else. I turned to see her drop down upon the floor among the fragments of broken mantel ornaments, almost as if they were her only concern. And then, all at once, I saw a thing that made me forget the fight and all it threatened upon us, in an instant of huge amazement. For there, among crushed fragments of a little statuette of the Venus de Milo, under her hands where she knelt and gathered them to her with eagerness like a child's over beloved toys that have been scattered, I saw a little group of papers,

curled up with being long rolled together, but lying there upon the tiles of the hearth as if they had been forced by some magic up into sight from a hiding-place below. And I understood the cry that announced discovery indeed.

I did not move toward her. I only looked on. So did all the rest of the spellbound group, including Judson Bain himself, from his position on the floor where he still lay—while the girl drew the papers together, pressed them to her like the precious possessions they were now, and turned to her brother. And never shall I forget the face of her or of Hal as she put them into his hands.

“They are found, indeed,” was what she said as she turned back to me, and the shout that Hal uttered was almost an echo to her words, as he opened the curling sheets and took one glance at them and then waved them in wild rejoicing above his head.

I turned to look at Bain. The fight was gone out of him now. He sat with his big body bent forward, his eyes staring, his face pale, with the beaten look on his drooping lips, with his hands spread helplessly on the floor and his breath coming in gasps that suggested shuddering.

I turned to the marshal. “There’s your man, Clausen,” I said. “He isn’t the one you came for, but he will do. I had one good case against him, but we’ll forget that. I charge him with conspiracy, and I will appear against him with every one of the

men who is with us here as a witness to this final scene."

"But where were those papers all this time?" asked Aunt Charlotte, from the background where she had stood trembling throughout the scene. "Why didn't you bring them forward sooner, Mr. Randall?"

"Because," said I, watching Bain, "it seems that the little Venus de Milo had them—safely stored in her hollow interior. Mr. Bain just found them for us."

CHAPTER XXVIII

WHAT COULDN'T BE HELPED

IT was what had happened. Simple enough it was when we knew. The lost papers were found. The little statuette, like all other plaster casts, was hollow, and none of us had remembered it. It had been the hiding place Salver had chosen—with cleverness that was almost our undoing. But the cane of Judson Bain, intended to break my devoted head, had crushed the fragile lady instead and had revealed her secret in the very crisis of our desperate case. Hal was saved; and the very look of him had changed ten minutes after the convincing evidence of the truth of his whole story had been discovered. I have never seen happiness and assurance do any one so much good as it did him that day.

The warlike scene in the library ended very promptly indeed. The marshal took Bain out. He was like a man in a dream, dazed by the suddenness of his downfall. His aids followed, and I looked in the face of Curly Conrad and laughed, as I recalled the last time I had faced him. And the little villain dared not even twist his face at me because of what had happened to his principal.

And then—then came the explanations that we needed to piece out our story. The hunchback Garth, whom we had turned over to the servants and had nearly forgotten in the doings of the hour, came to the front again, and told us a tale that revealed many things. He it had been who, happening to be at the house, had learned of the revolver in the library table drawer on the day Hal had shot at the hawk. And he it was who had told Salver of it. Moreover, he remembered that it had not been reloaded before Hal put it back into the drawer. That was all in his confession. Then he told a strange story. The girl Luella Westfall had indeed been kidnapped by Bain and Scancey and was even then confined in Scancey's house where he, Garth, had been kept out of sight. He told of a conversation he had overheard that explained the midnight run of the automobile from Bain's which the young lawyer, Cole, had witnessed, and which had drawn me off upon the chase to Cold Spring. It appeared that the girl had indeed gone to Bain, but for quite a different purpose than that which would naturally be ascribed to her. Hers was a sad story indeed. The boy stated that she told in his hearing—what was afterward a part of her testimony in court—that she was the lawful, though secret, wife of no less a person than Clarence Salver himself, and that she knew that he had robbed the offices of Judson Bain and intended to use the letters he had found there to get money from Hal, Fenelon, or from

Bain himself. Only his wild violence at The Hazels, which had resulted in the shooting, had brought his scheme to naught and himself to the end of a worthless career. The hiding of the papers, almost the final act of his life, however, was characteristic of him in the cleverness of its instantaneous conception and execution. Bain had taken the girl in hand with threats and promises, till he had managed to get her into his house; and he had then shut her up, taking her to Cold Spring and later transferring her back to Scancey's home, keeping her quiet by frightening her. He had never taken her to Hart at all, so Curly Conrad had been quick enough to fool me once, at least.

But when Barnaby was notified of what had happened at The Hazels, there quickly developed one more amazing thing. The strange woman, mother of the Westfall girl, had found her own tongue after her daughter's mistreatment, and she had come forward with a charge that capped the sheaf of Bain's villainy. For she told and proved abundantly by letters and keepsakes, strangely cherished through many silent years, that that heartless villain was the father of the very luckless girl whom he had tried to involve in shameful scandal. She said that she herself had been deserted, but had finally found the author of her trouble and had forced him to care for them both on pain of exposure. Punk Salver, the mother said, had discovered the truth about the time he had married her daughter, and

he had frightened the girl into silence about their wedding, while he himself had blackmailed Bain. It had been in a fit of anger, because Bain would not meet an unusually heavy demand, that he had stolen the letters.

It was a sad story, indeed, and the less detailed the better. But Barnaby had moved quickly enough to compass the arrest of Scancey and the finding of the girl in his home. Also several arrests were made at Cold Spring on my complaint, for the shooting that had nearly done for me. And so before our morning was over there was an end of the necessity for us to hold our own weapons, for our enemies were all either in the toils or disarmed.

Doctor Graham came before we had finished our talk together in the library. It was at his order that I was stretched again upon my bed in my chamber; but he allowed the little conclave to hold session there rather than shut me out of all the final explanations. And there I heard the complete stories from him and from King that gave me their sides of the matter. It was no wonder that they had looked upon me with question. I realized then, too, that King's attitude was no more blameworthy toward me than mine toward the good doctor, for he, if not a wise man, was true, also. He told us frankly that he had serious doubt of the existence of the letters which Hal thought he had seen, from the very first, and he related a number of instances of various sorts of self-deception that he had ob-

served in nervous sufferers, to show that his position was not unreasonable. But I have never been able to understand his feeling and I have only excused him because I did him a wrong in thinking that he might have had to do with the disappearance of the letters, and because, poor chap, I learned afterwards, that he himself had loved Donna Philbric, even as I did.

As for King—that honest chap came to me and apologized like a man for treating me as he had, and my liking for him grew, though he seemed yet to stand between me and all that made my share in this happy finish of our adventure worth while. We parted friends when he went back to town that noon, for the doctor insisted that I should not be allowed to move again till my wounds were thoroughly healed, and the Philbrics, brother and sister, would not hear to my going to a city hospital. And that night, after a long sleep that brought back some of my strength again, I listened to a brief story from the boy that was not the least curious part of the revelations, nor the least satisfactory of the developments of my experience.

“Randall,” he said, “when you were a boy you had a devoted nurse who was named Maggie Valentine?”

“Why, yes,” I answered. Dear old Maggie! She had taken care of me in my childhood and had been the most devoted of nurses. Afterwards she had gone to my uncle’s household. But I had writ-

ten to her for years and had sent the little remittances I have mentioned, for my affection for the kindly woman, who had done much for me after my own dear mother had died, had been one of the lasting things of my life.

Hal looked at me and laughed, as I answered him quite unsuspectingly. "Don't you put two and two together, old man?" he asked.

"Not yet," said I obtusely.

"Well, then," said the boy, "I'll have to do it for you. Maggie Valentine was also nurse to Donna and me when we were little folks. She came to our home from yours."

I lay quite still and looked up at him with my mind leaping swiftly enough now to grasp explanations of some things that had happened to me at The Hazels. Hal sat beside my bed watching my face and enjoying my look. Then he laughed at me again.

"You are a little tin saint to Maggie, Dan Randall," he said. "She idolized you as a small boy if ever a nurse idolized a charge. And she has talked of you to Donna and to me till your name has been to us like the name of a favorite character out of a story book. And we have known Maggie all these years; and while you have been sending her money she has been singing your praises tirelessly to us. Do you wonder that we were surprised and—interested—when you turned up to take a real hand in the affairs of the Philbrics as you

did in such odd fashion? Do you wonder we felt that we knew you?"

"Good old Maggie!" said I. "It was one of my plans to look her up as soon as I should arrive in the city. So that is the story, is it? That was the cause of my welcome when I came without introduction?"

Hal smiled again. "That was your introduction, Randall." But he continued to smile at me in a sort of enigmatic way and I knew this was not all. I asked him. "No," he answered, "that isn't all, but it is all I shall tell you—now."

I could not prevail upon him to give me any further details and certain recollections then made me cease to ask it of him. But later I learned all of the rest.

It was the next morning, another glorious morning of April sunshine, that Donna and Aunt Charlotte allowed me to have my way about getting up, to the extent of making a place for me in the library again, where I should be quiet; and old John insisted on helping me down thither, though I felt fit enough, despite the disturbance to which my hurts had been subjected. It was Sunday morning, too, and I, who had not thought even to name a day since I had come, read the paper's accounts of the happenings of yesterday and smoked my forgotten pipe, while I reckoned now the even week since a stalled train had dropped me into "the affairs of the Philbrics." And then I lay and listened to

church bells ringing across a peaceful countryside and let a dream have its dangerous course.

It was while I lay there, thoughtfully provided by old John with Hal's tobacco-jar, that a curious solution of our final and now almost forgotten mystery came fairly into my hand, as it were. The tobacco had not been touched during the week since the startling tragedy had broken the peace of the home, and I was the first to use the jar. I found the mixture dry, with the first pipe full, and it was when I was delving more deeply for the second supply that my fingers found in the depths of the jar a curious, hard substance. I had no suspicion what it might be when I drew it out, but one glance was enough when I held it up to the light. It was a misshapen piece of lead—a bullet—the bullet! It was the lost third bullet—the one that Punk Salver had fired at Hal on the morning of his fatal visit to the library and that had so mysteriously gone astray.

How to account for its presence there in the tobacco-jar was at first almost as much of a puzzle as had been the mystery of its disappearance previously, but I studied it out. Investigation got me up from my couch again, but it resulted in satisfaction this time. Only in one way could that leaden missile have found its way into the jar, and that was by falling in; and I had a sudden recollection of the story Hal had told of how old John, in the mechanical operations he had performed about the

room after the shooting had "covered the tobacco-jar." I instantly concluded that the bullet could only have hit some object above the open jar and dropped into the tobacco, and five minutes were all that was necessary to fix upon the chandelier as the object hit. Search then revealed the fact that the bullet had gone high, and had indeed struck the chandelier, and had even left slight trace behind, for it had entered the filigree work sphere near the bottom and struck the solid tubing within, breaking out a small piece that dropped softly, with the bullet itself, from the hole in the bottom of the sphere, to repose, all unsuspected, in the unused tobacco, till I should find them there.

I laid the things aside for Hal and went back to my couch to review again the strange order of chance that had played tricks with us. But I was not long alone, for it was then that Donna came to sit by me and talk of what was best to do for Hal and his health, now that we could choose what should be done. But we did not talk of Hal—just then. I couldn't. I knew what would be good for the boy and it would be time enough to offer my plan again when I was in condition to carry out the part I meant to have in it. But the thing I had to say to this sweet girl would not wait. Perhaps I was not fair, nor considerate, nor kind, nor generous—nor any of the other things a lover should be to the girl he loves when he finds advantage with him. But love has been a ruthless thing with me

and my excuse is the old, old one that men have claimed from the beginning. I could not help it.

She sat by me in the firelight of the library, and all her wonderful beauty laid upon me a spell I could not have conquered if I had had the will. I plead guilty now to all indictments you care to bring. But I must needs put to the touch my fate, then and there, without reck or care for consequences if the end did not justify my hope. I had played the cards fate had dealt to me and I must know now whether it was to lose or win.

"Donna," I said to her, when good Aunt Charlotte's interests in matters of the household kept her away from us and opportunity opened wide arms to me, "I can travel to the city. My wounds won't suffer for it. You can send me if you wish."

She began to demur, with a smile that fanned the flame in me beyond control. Her hands lay together on her knees, as she sat regarding me with earnest eyes, unsuspecting yet of what I meant to say. I put my own upon them, covering them and holding gently against her first startled impulse to draw away. And then I spoke as earnestly and bravely as I could.

"Donna," I said. "I must have it. I love you! Is there one spark of hope for me?" I broke off, for it was my all.

Yes, she started once away from me. I felt her fingers tremble and strive. But I held them and they ceased to struggle. But what shall I say of

the wonder-joy that filled my soul when she turned her lovely face up once more to mine and the smile—the beautiful smile came back to drive the startled surprise away and to give me the answer for which I had scarcely dared to dream a hope? And whose forgiveness shall I ask now for inconsideration—now that I have hers?

I did not ask her about King. She told me. He had asked her to marry him; not once only, but many times. Poor old King! She simply did not love him. Why she should love me instead I am content to leave an unanswered question. Indeed, what would love be worth that was based on readily stated reasons?

But she told me then, the thing dear old Maggie Valentine had said and repeated many times, the memory of which it had been that had brought the blood to her face that first day of mine at The Hazels.

“Dan,” she said, “Hal told you about Maggie?”

“Yes,” I answered, “a little. Tell me the rest now.”

She laughed, a happy, delighted laugh. “She was a worshipper at your shrine, Dan,” she said. “Do you know what she has said to me over and over till it was almost like a prophecy?” She paused, then whispered softly, “‘Ah, if you ever know Danny Randall, child,’ she told me, ‘you will love him.’”

She looked up with her face all pink once more

with her boldness ; but I laughed again. " And that is why ? " I asked.

" Perhaps," she answered.

I can spend my life telling the whys of my love to her, and I shall not detail what more is said to me by her sweet lips—the dear, tender red lips that I once bruised by chance so cruelly !

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